TO STEP ASIDE

By Noel Coward

Plays

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I'LL LEAVE IT TO YOU
THE YOUNG IDEA
HAY FEVER
THE VORTEX
FALLEN ANGELS
EASY VIRTUE
THE QUEEN WAS IN THE PARLOUR
THIS WAS A MAN
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COMPUTERIZED

TO STEP ASIDE

SEVEN SHORT STORIES

BY NOEL COWARD

★

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TO NATASHA AND JACK
AND TO FAIRFIELD, CONNECTICUT,
THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED
WITH MY LOVE

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"To Step Aside is Human"

—ROBERT BURNS

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The Wooden Madonna

I

AUBREY DAKERS relaxed, a trifle self-consciously, in a pink cane chair outside the Café Bienvenue. He crossed one neatly creased trouser leg over the other and regarded his suede shoes whimsically for a moment and then, lighting a cigarette, gave himself up to enjoyment of the scene before him. His enjoyment was tempered with irritation. He had a slight headache from the train and the air was colder than he had anticipated, also it looked suspiciously as though it might rain during the next hour or so; however the sun was out for the time being and there was quite a lot to look at. On the other side of the water, mountains towered up into the sky, a number of small waterfalls lay on them like feathers and, in the distance, the higher peaks were still covered with snow. Little white steamers with black funnels bustled about the lake while immediately before him, beneath the blossoming chestnut trees, promenaded a series of highly characteristic types. By the newspaper kiosk for instance there was a group of young men, three of them wore bottle green capes and hats with feathers at the back, the fourth was more

mundane in an ordinary Homburg and a buttoned-up mackintosh that looked quite hard like a cardboard box. Two artificial looking children, dressed in red and blue respectively, galloped along the pavement bowling hoops; a grey man with an umbrella waited furtively by the ticket office at the head of the little wooden pier, obviously a secret agent. Seated at a table on Aubrey's right were two English ladies, one very grand in black, wearing several gold chains and brooches and a patrician hat mounted high on bundles of grey hair; the other, small and servile, waited on her eagerly, pouring out tea, offering patisserie, wriggling a little, like a dog waiting to have a ball thrown for it. "How funny," thought Aubrey, "if the Grand one really did throw a ball and sent her scampering off yapping under people's feet!" Pleased with this fantasy he smiled and then, observing a waiter looking at him, ordered a cup of coffee rather crossly.

Aubrey Dakers at the age of twenty-seven was in the enviable position of having written a successful play and in the less enviable position of having eventually to follow it up with another. If not another play, a novel, or at least a book of short stories. His play *Animal Grab* had already run for over a year in London and showed every sign of continuing indefinitely. It had been hailed enthusiastically by the critics. He had been described as "A new star in the theatrical firmament." "A second Somerset Maugham." "A second Noel Coward." "A second Oscar Wilde" and "A new playwright of

considerable promise." This last had been in *The Times* and, as was right and proper, headed the list of press comments outside the theatre. The extraordinary part of the whole thing was that Aubrey had never really intended to write a play at all, nor indeed to write anything. He had been perfectly content running a little antique shop with Maurice Macgrath in Ebury Street, which had been reasonably successful for six years and they had been happy as larks together. Aubrey remembered with a pang of nostalgia those early days, before they had actually opened the shop, when the whole thing was still in the air so to speak. That fateful Easter Monday when Maurice had suddenly come up from his parents' home in Kent and broken the glorious news. "My dear!" Aubrey could still recapture the thrill in his voice, "I've got the money!—Uncle Vernon's promised it and got round father and everything and we're to start looking for premises right away—isn't it absolutely heavenly?"

Then those lovely spring days motoring over the countryside, in Maurice's sister's Talbot, ransacking every antique shop they could find and often returning long after dark with the rumble seat crammed with oddments. The bigger stuff they bought was of course impossible to convey in the Talbot so this was all sent to be stored in Norman's studio, where, Norman being away in Capri for the winter, it could stay in the charge of Norman's housekeeper until May at least. Before May, however, they had found the shop in Ebury Street, fallen

in love with it on sight and taken it recklessly on a twelve year lease. Aubrey sighed. There had been anxious hours during those first few months. Then had come the sale of the Queen Anne set, broken chair and all, and then, almost as though Fate had suddenly determined to bewilder them with success, the bread trough and the Dutch candelabra were bought on the same day. You could never forget moments like that. The evening of celebration they'd had! Dinner at the Berkeley Grill and front row stalls for the ballet.

After that the business had climbed steadily. They had always thought it would once they had a good start, and it did. During the ensuing years dinners at the Berkeley and stalls for the ballet became almost commonplace. But alas, even for amiable harmless lives like those of Aubrey and Maurice the laws of change are inexorable. In the year nineteen-thirty-six the blow fell or, to be more accurate, a series of blows, beginning with Lady Brophy opening an elaborate interior decorating establishment five doors away from them. Lady Brophy was idle and rich, and with the heedless extravagance of the amateur, altered her window display completely every few weeks. She seldom arrived at her shop before noon, and then in a Rolls Royce, when Aubrey and Maurice had been at their post since nine o'clock as usual. Lady Brophy was undoubtedly the first blow. The drop in business within a few weeks of her arrival was only too apparent. The second blow was Maurice getting 'flu and then pneumonia and being sent to Sainte Maxime to

convalesce where he first met Ivan. The third blow was a small but effective fire in the basement of the shop which demolished a Sheraton chair, two gate-legged tables, one good, the other so-so, a Jacobean corner cupboard, a set of Victorian engravings, two painted ostrich eggs circa 1850, and a really precious Spanish four-poster bed that Maurice had bought at an auction in Sevenoaks. The final and ultimately most decisive blow was Maurice's return to London with Ivan.

Ivan was more thoroughly Russian than any Russian Aubrey had ever seen. He was tall, melancholy, intellectual, given to spectacular outbursts of temperament and connected with the film business. Not, of course, in an active commercial way but on the experimental side. He was ardently at work upon a colour film of shapes and sounds only, for which, he asserted positively, one of the principal companies in Hollywood was eagerly waiting. Aubrey often reproached himself for having been so nice to Ivan. If only he had known then what he knew later he would probably have been able to have nipped the whole thing in the bud, but then of course he could never have believed, unless it had been hammered into his brain by brutal reality, that Maurice could be so silly and, above all, so deceitful—but still there it was. Maurice suddenly announced that he wanted to give up the shop and lead a different sort of life entirely. You could have knocked Aubrey down with a feather. Maurice began the scene just as they were dressing to go to a first night at the Old Vic. Of course they hadn't

gone. Even now Aubrey could hardly think of that awful evening without trembling. They had stayed in the flat, half dressed, just as they were and had the whole thing out. It had finally transpired that the root of the whole trouble was that Maurice was dissatisfied with himself. That, of course, was typical of Maurice—suddenly to be dissatisfied with himself when there was so much extra work to be done on account of the fire and a lot of new stuff to be bought. In vain Aubrey had remonstrated with him. In vain he had reiterated that what you are you are, and all the wishing in the world won't make you any different. Maurice had argued back that deep in his subconscious mind he had always had a conviction that what he was he wasn't really, that is to say at least not nearly so much as Aubrey was and that Ivan with his brilliant mind and wonderful view of life was the only person in the world who could really understand and help him; also, he added, he was an expert horseman. A few hours later they had gone out and had a chicken sandwich upstairs at the Café de Paris, both of them quite calm, purged of all emotion, but miserably aware that whatever the future might have in store for them, something very precious and important had been lost irretrievably.

That had all happened two and a half years ago. They had sold the shop jointly. Stock, lease, good-will and everything. Aubrey had felt himself unable, even in the face of Maurice's pleading, to carry it on by himself or even with Norman, who had been quite keen to come in.

The whole thing was over and that was that. Much better make a clean cut and embark on something new.

Maurice had, in due course, departed for America with Ivan, but there had apparently been some sort of hitch over the colour film, for Aubrey had received a brief postcard from him some months later saying that he had obtained a position as assistant in Gump's Oriental Store in San Francisco and was very happy.

To embark on something new proved to be difficult for Aubrey for the simple reason that he had not the remotest idea what to embark on. He had a small amount of money saved from his share of the shop, and in order to husband this as carefully as possible he rejoined his family and stayed with them unenthusiastically for several months. He might have been less apathetic and devitalised had he but known at the time that those months at home with his parents, two unmarried sisters, a young brother and an elder brother with a wife and child, were the turning point in his life. *Animal Grab*, the comedy that had so entranced London and brought him such staggering success, had actually been written at his sister-in-law's request, for the local Amateur Dramatic Society to perform at the Town Hall for Christmas. There it had been seen quite by chance, by Thornton Heatherly, who happened to be staying in the neighbourhood and was taken to it. Thornton Heatherly, an enterprising young man with a hare-lip, had been running a small repertory theatre at Hounslow for nearly two years at a loss although with

a certain amount of critical réclame and *Animal Grab* impressed him, not so much by its wit or craftsmanship or story, but by its unabashed family appeal. There was a persistent vogue of family plays of all sorts in London. *Animal Grab* was as authentic and definitely noisier than most, in addition to which it had two sure fire characters in it. A vague, lovable mother who always forgot people's names and a comedy cook who repeatedly gave notice.

Thornton Heatherly drove over to see Aubrey the next day, bought a year's option on the play with a minimum advance on account of royalties, and exactly eight weeks later, after a triumphant fortnight at Hounslow, it became the smash hit of the London season.

Since then Aubrey had had a busy time adjusting himself to his new circumstances. First he took the upper part of a small house in South Eaton Place, which he furnished bit by bit with impeccable taste, until, finally, for sheer perfection of Victorian atmosphere, it rivalled even Norman's famous flat in Clebe Place. Then he gradually acquired, with expensive clothes to go with it, a manner of cynical detachment, which was most effective and came in handy as an opening gambit when meeting strangers. "How extraordinary," they would exclaim. "One would never imagine that the author of *Animal Grab* looked in the least like you," to which he would reply with a light sophisticated smile and a certain disarming honesty—"Actually the play is based on my own family which only goes to prove how wickedly deceptive appearances can be!" Everyone, in the face

of such amused candour, found him charming and he was invited everywhere. It was, of course, inevitable that the more intellectual of his friends shouldn't much care for *Animal Grab*. While having to admit its authenticity they were scornful of its excessive naiveté. Vivian Melrose, who contributed abstract poems and, occasionally, even more abstract dramatic criticisms to *The Weekly Revue* and ran a leftist book-shop in Marylebone summed it up very pungently, "*Animal Grab*," he said, "makes Puberty seem like Senile Decay!" Aubrey was smart enough to quote this with a wry laugh on several occasions, but in his heart he felt that Vivian had really gone a little too far. However, fortified by his weekly royalty cheques, the sale of the amateur rights, the sale of the film rights and serialisation in the *Evening Standard*, he could afford to ignore such gibes to a certain extent, but nevertheless a slight sting remained. He had signed an optional contract with Thornton Heatherly for the next two plays he wrote but as yet he had been unable to put pen to paper. After endless conversations with his intimate friends, such as Norman, and Elvira James, who was a literary agent and knew a thing or two, he had decided that his next effort should not be a play at all. He would first of all write a book of short stories, some of which need not be more than light sketches, in order to form an easy flexible style and then try his hand at a novel. He felt a strong urge—as indeed who doesn't?—to write a really good modern novel. Elvira and he had discussed this project very thoroughly. "To begin with," she had

said, "it must not be about a family, either your own or anybody else's. The vogue for family life, although running strong at the moment will not last for ever and there will be a reaction, mark my words." Aubrey agreed with her whole heartedly, for truth to tell, family feeling, although charmingly expressed in *Animal Grab* was not, and never had been, his strong point. "Then," went on Elvira relentlessly, "there must be no character in your book who is absent-minded, your heroine must never say 'Come on, old Weasel, let's have another sett', and no old gentleman, Father, Uncle, Vicar or Professor must be called 'Boffles'!" Aubrey, recognising the innate wisdom of this, promised. "Away with you," said Elvira, "go away and take notes, watch people, travel, look at Somerset Maugham!" This conversation had taken place a week ago and here he was alone in Switzerland having looked at Somerset Maugham steadfastly since leaving Victoria.

It must not be imagined that Aubrey intended to imitate anybody's particular style, he was far too intelligent for that, but he realised that a careful study of expert methods must in the long run be of some use to a beginner, and Aubrey had no illusions whatever as to his status as a writer. He only knew now, after the violent change that had occurred in his life during the last eighteen months, that he wanted, really wanted, to write. His notes, since leaving England, while not exactly copious, at least showed praiseworthy determination. "Old Lady on platform in wheel chair, probably French

Duchess." "Man in dining car with elderly woman obviously German." He had had later to cross out German and put Scotch as he happened to hear them talking in the corridor. "The French countryside seen from a railway carriage window looks strangely unfinished." That wasn't bad. "Indian Colonel and wife going to take cure in Wiesbaden suddenly have terrible row and he kills her in tunnel." This had been suggested by two disagreeable people at the next table to him at dinner in the Wagon restaurant.

Sitting outside this café in the afternoon sunshine his mind felt pleasantly alert. It had certainly been a good idea, this little continental jaunt; here he could sit, for hours if need be, just watching and listening and absorbing atmosphere. Later, of course, in the bar of the hotel or in the lounge after dinner, he would get into conversation with various people and draw them out subtly to talk about themselves, to tell him their stories. His knowledge of French being only adequate he hoped that should they wish to lay bare their lives in that language that they would not speak too rapidly. Of German he knew not a word, so whatever he gathered would have to be in English, slow French or by signs.

At this moment in his reflections his attention was caught by the seedy-looking man whom he had noticed before buying a ticket for the boat. Something in the way he was standing, or rather leaning against the railing, struck a familiar chord in his mind. He reminded him of somebody, that's what it was, but who? He scrutinised

him carefully, the grey suit, the umbrella, the straggling moustache, the air of depressed resignation. Then he remembered—he was exactly like a commoner, foreign edition of Uncle Philip. Aubrey sighed with relief at having identified him; there is nothing so annoying as being tantalised by a resemblance. Uncle Philip! It might make quite an interesting little story if Uncle Philip, after all those years of marriage suddenly left Aunt Freda and came here to live in some awful little pension with a French prostitute. Or perhaps not live with her, just meet her every afternoon here at the pier. His eyes would light up when she stepped off the boat (she worked in a café in a town on the other side of the lake and only had a few hours off), and they would walk away together under the chestnut trees, he timidly holding her arm. Then they would go to some sordid bedroom in the town somewhere and he, lying with her arms round him, would suddenly think of his life, those years at Exeter with Aunt Freda, and laugh madly. Aubrey looked at the Swiss Uncle Philip again; he was reading a newspaper now very intently. Perhaps, after all, he was a secret agent as he had at first thought and was waiting for the boat to take him down the lake to the town on the other side of the frontier, where he would sit in a bar with two men in bowler hats and talk very ostentatiously about his son who was ill in Zurich, which would give them to understand that Karl had received the papers satisfactorily in Amsterdam.

At this moment a bell rang loudly and a steamer sidled

up to the pier. The man folded his paper, waved his hand and was immediately joined by a large woman in green and three children who had been sitting on a seat. They all went on to the boat together, the children making a good deal of noise. Aubrey sighed. Just another family.

While Aubrey was having his bath before dinner he visualised, on Somerset Maugham lines, the evening before him. A cocktail in the bar, then a table in the corner of the dining-room commanding an excellent view of all the other tables. A distinguished looking man, slightly grey at the temples eating alone at a table by the window, high cheek-bones, skin yellowed by malaria and tropical suns. Then later, in the lounge, "Perhaps you would do me the honour of taking a glass of brandy with me." Aubrey agreeing with an assured smile, noting the while those drawn lines of pain round the finely cut mouth, those hollow, rather haunted eyes. "One can at least say of this hotel that the brandy is of unparalleled excellence!" That slightly foreign accent, Russian perhaps or even Danish! Then the story—bit by bit, gradually unfolding—"I wonder if you ever knew the Baroness Fugler? A strange woman, dead now poor thing; I ran across her brother once in the Ukraine, that was just after the war, then later on, seven years to be exact, I ran across him again in Hankow; I happened to be there on business. He was probably the most brilliant scientist of his time. Has it ever occurred to you to reflect upon the strange passions that lie dormant

in the minds of the most upright men?" The lounge emptying, still that level unemotional voice retailing the extraordinary, almost macabre, history of the Baroness Fugler's brother, the scandal in Hong Kong, the ruining of his career, his half-caste wife and finally the denouement.

Aubrey, at last rising. "Thank you so much—what a wonderful story. And what happened to the woman?" Then the sudden bitter chuckle, "The woman, my friend—happens to be my wife!"

2

Aubrey, immaculately dressed in a dinner jacket, descended to the bar, where he was discouraged to find no one whatever except the barman, who was totting up figures and absently eating potato salad. Aubrey suspected that there must be garlic in the potato salad as it smelt very strong. It was rather a dingy little bar, dimly lit, although modern in decoration to the extent that everything that looked as though it ought to be round was square or vice versa and there was a lot of red about. Aubrey hoisted himself on to a square stool and ordered a dry Martini and a packet of Player's. The barman, although quite willing to be pleasant, was not discoursive and turned on the radio. Aubrey sipped his Martini and listened, a trifle wistfully, to an Italian tenor singing "Santa Lucia," and when that was over "La

Donna e Mobile." Presently several people came in together, they were elderly and without glamour, and they stood silently by the bar as though they were waiting for some catastrophe. The barman glanced at the clock and then switched the radio to another station. A tremendous shriek ensued which he modulated until it became a German voice announcing the news. Aubrey could only pick out a word or two here and there such as "Einmal," "Americanische," "Freundschaft" and "Mussolini," so he ordered another dry Martini in a whisper. At the end of the news, which lasted half an hour, everybody bowed to the barman and filed out. Just as Aubrey was preparing to give up the whole thing and go and have dinner, a bald man of about fifty came in. He was obviously English and although not quite as sinister and distinguished as Aubrey would have wished, he was better than nobody. Aubrey noted the details of his appearance with swift professional accuracy. A long nose, eyes rather close together, a jutting under-lip, slight jowl, as though at some time in his life someone had seized his face with both hands and pulled it downwards. His clothes were quite good and his figure podgy without being exactly fat. He said "Good evening" in a voice that wasn't quite cockney but might have been a long while ago. Aubrey replied with alacrity and offered him a drink, whereupon the man said, "That's very nice of you, my name's Edmundson," as though the thought of accepting a drink from anyone who didn't know his name was Edmundson was not to be tolerated for a

moment. Aubrey said that his name was Dakers and they shook hands cordially.

Mr. Edmundson was more than ready to talk, and before a quarter of an hour had passed Aubrey had docketed a number of facts. Mr. Edmundson was fifty-four and was in the silk business although he intended to retire shortly and let his son, who was married and had two children, a boy and a girl, take over for him. He also had two daughters both unmarried. One, however, was engaged to a nice young fellow in the Air Force, this was Sylvia the younger. The elder, Blanche, was having her voice trained with the object of becoming an opera singer. It was apparently a fine voice and very high indeed, and both Mr. and Mrs. Edmundson were at a loss to imagine where she had got it from as neither of them had any musical talent whatsoever. She was very good-looking too, although not so striking as Sylvia, who was the sort of girl people turn round to stare at in restaurants. Mr. Edmundson produced a snapshot from his note-case showing both girls with arms entwined against a sundial with somebody's foot and calf in the left-hand corner. "That's Mrs. Edmundson's foot," he said gaily, "she didn't get out of the way in time." Aubrey looked at the photograph with his head on one side and gave a little cluck of admiration. "They *are* nice-looking girls," he said as convincingly as he could. Thus encouraged, Mr. Edmundson went on about them a good deal more. Sylvia was the dashing one of the two and in many ways an absolute little minx; whatever she

set her heart on she got, she was that sort of character; in fact, a few years ago when she was just beginning to be grown up, both he and Mrs. Edmundson had frequently been quite worried about her. Blanche, on the other hand, despite her musical gift, was more balanced and quiet, which was very odd really, because you would have thought it would have been just the other way round. Aubrey agreed that it certainly was most peculiar but there just wasn't any way of accounting for things like that. "This is my son Leonard," said Mr. Edmundson producing another snapshot with the deftness of a card manipulator. "He's different again." Aubrey looked at it and admitted that he was. Leonard was short and sturdy with an under-slung jaw and eyebrows that went straight across his forehead in a black bar. On his lap he was holding, rather self-consciously, a mad baby. Mr. Edmundson discoursed for a long while upon Leonard's flair for engineering which apparently fell little short of genius. Ever since he was a tiny boy he had been unable to see a watch or a clockwork engine or a musical box without tearing it to pieces immediately; and when he was sixteen he had completely dismembered his new motor-cycle on the front lawn within three hours of having received it.

During dinner, Mr. Edmundson having suggested that as they were both alone it would be pleasant to share a table, he explained that the reason he had come to Switzerland was to see a specialist on diseases of the bladder who had been recommended to him by a well-

known doctor in Tonbridge. It appeared that for nearly a year past there had been a certain divergence of opinion as to whether he was forming a stone or not, and both he and his wife had decided, after mature consideration, that by far the wisest thing to do was to get an expert opinion once and for all. The Swiss specialist, who wasn't really Swiss but Austrian, had declared that as far as he could discover there were no indications of a stone having been formed or even beginning to form, but that in order to be on the safe side Mr. Edmundson must lead a perfectly normal life for ten days eating and drinking all that was habitual to him, which of course accounted for the three dry Martinis he had had in the bar, and then further tests would be made and we should see what we should see.

After dinner, in the lounge where they took their coffee, Mr. Edmundson reverted to his domestic affairs, discussing, at length, Blanche's prospects in Grand Opera; the problematical happiness of Sylvia when married to an aviator who might be killed at any minute; the advisability of forcing Leonard into the silk business where he would be certain of an assured income, or allowing him to continue with his experimental engineering; and last, but by no means least, whether Mrs. Edmundson's peculiar lassitude for the past few months was really caused by her teeth, as had been suggested, or whether it could be accounted for by those well-known biological changes that occur in all women of a certain age. He personally was in favour of the teeth theory and agreed with the doctor that she ought to have

every man jack of them pulled out, and a nice set of artificial ones put in. The idea of this, however, somehow repelled Mrs. Edmundson, and so at the moment things were more or less at a deadlock.

Leaving them at a deadlock, Aubrey, increasingly aware that his head was splitting, almost abruptly said good night and departed, on leaden feet, to his room.

The next morning, round about half-past ten, Aubrey was sunning himself on his balcony, breathing in gratefully the fresh mountain air and enjoying the romantic tranquil beauty of the view. The lake was calm and blue and without a ripple except for the occasional passing of a steamer and a few little coloured rowing boats sculling about close to the shore. Fleecy clouds lay around the peaks of the mountains and the morning was so still that the cow bells in the high pastures could be heard quite clearly. Presently Mr. Edmundson appeared on the next balcony about four feet away from him. "What a bit of luck," he said cheerfully, "I had no idea we were next door neighbours." Conversation, or rather monologue, set in immediately. "I've had a postcard from Leonard's wife," he went on. "The younger child, the boy, woke up yesterday morning covered in spots and they're very worried, of course. I don't suppose it's anything serious, but you never know, do you? Anyhow, they sent for the doctor at once and kept the little girl away from school in case it might turn out to be something catching, and they're going to telegraph me during the day."

Aubrey endured this for a few minutes and then rose

with a great air of decision. Mr. Edmundson, with the swiftness of a cat who perceives that the most enjoyable mouse it has met for weeks is about to vanish down a hole, pounced. "I thought we might take a walk round the town together," he said, "or even a little excursion on the lake; those skiffs are no trouble to handle."

Aubrey, shaken by the suggestion, replied that there would be nothing he would have liked better but that he was being called for by some friends who were driving him up to the mountains for lunch.

"Never mind," said Mr. Edmundson, "we're sure to meet later."

Aubrey lay on his bed for a while, shattered. He had been looking forward to a stroll through the town by himself and later a quiet lunch either on the hotel terrace or at a café down by the lake. Now, having committed himself to a drive in the mountains with his mythical friends he was almost bound to be caught out. Why, oh why hadn't he been smart enough to think of a less concrete excuse? Suddenly he jumped up. The thing to do was to finish dressing and get out of the hotel immediately before Mr. Edmundson got downstairs. Once in the town he could keep a careful look out and dart into a shop or something if he saw him coming. Fortunately, he had already bathed and shaved and in less than ten minutes he tiptoed out of his room. The coast was clear. He ran lightly down the stairs rather than use the lift which might take too long to come up. He was detained for a moment in the lounge by the hotel

manager enquiring if he had slept well, but contrived to shake him off and sped through the palm garden on to the terrace. Mr. Edmundson rose from a chair at the top of the steps. "No sign of your friend's car yet," he said. "Why not sit down and have a Tom Collins?"

"I'm afraid I can't," said Aubrey hurriedly. "I promised to meet them in the town and I'm late as it is."

"I'll come with you," Mr. Edmundson squared his shoulders. "I feel like a brisk walk."

Half-way to the town Aubrey gave an elaborate glance at his wrist-watch. "I'm afraid I shall have to run," he said. "I promised to meet them at 11.15 and it's now twenty to twelve."

"Do us both good," said Mr. Edmundson and broke into a trot. In the main square, which Aubrey had chosen at random as being the place where his friends were meeting him, there was, not unnaturally, no sign of them. Mr. Edmundson suggested sitting down outside a café and waiting. "They've probably been held up on the road," he said.

"I'm afraid," murmured Aubrey weakly, "that they're much more likely to have thought I wasn't coming and gone off without me."

"In that case," said Mr. Edmundson with a comforting smile, "we can take a little drive on our own and have lunch in the country somewhere."

During lunch, in a chalet restaurant high up on the side of a mountain, Mr. Edmundson spoke frankly of his early life. He had not, he said, always known the security,

independence and comparative luxury that he enjoyed now, far from it. His childhood, most of which had been spent in a small house just off the Kennington Road, had been poverty-stricken in the extreme. Many a time he remembered having to climb a lamp-post in order to get a brief glimpse of a cricket match at the Oval, and many a time also he had been chased by the police for this and like misdemeanours; indeed on one occasion——

Aubrey listened and went on listening in a sort of desperate apathy. There was nothing else to do, no escape whatever. Incidents of Mr. Edmundson's life washed over him in a never-ending stream; his experiences in the war during which he hadn't got so much as a flesh wound in three years; his apprenticeship to the silk trade as a minor office clerk in Birmingham; his steady climb for several years until he arrived at being first a traveller and then manager of a department in a big shop in South London; his first meeting with the now Mrs. Edmundson at a dance in Maida Vale; his marriage; his honeymoon at Torquay; the birth of Blanche. By the time the doctor had arrived to deliver Mrs. Edmundson of Sylvia it had become quite chilly in the chalet restaurant and the shadows of the mountains were beginning to draw out over the lake. In the taxi driving back to the town Sylvia was safely delivered and Leonard well on the way.

Finally, having reached his room and shut and locked the door Aubrey flung himself down on the bed in a state of collapse. His whole body felt saturated with boredom and his limbs ached as though he had been

running. Through the awful deadness of his despair he heard Mr. Edmundson in the next room humming a tune. Aubrey buried his head in the pillow and groaned.

3

Aubrey came down into the bar before dinner resolute and calm. He had had a hot bath, two aspirin, thought things out very carefully and made his decision. Consequently he was able to meet Mr. Edmundson's jocular salutation with equanimity. "I am leaving to-morrow evening," he said, graciously accepting a dry Martini. "For Venice."

Mr. Edmundson looked suitably disappointed. "What a shame," he said. "I thought you were staying for a week at least; in fact I was looking forward to being able to travel as far as Paris with you if my test turns out to be all right on Tuesday. You did say you were going to Paris from here, you know," he said reproachfully.

"I've changed my mind," said Aubrey. "I'm sick of Switzerland and I've always wanted to see Venice."

"Nice time of year for it anyhow," said Mr. Edmundson raising his glass. "Here goes."

The one thing that Aubrey had realised in the two hours respite before dinner was that no compromise was possible. He couldn't very well stay on in the same hotel as Mr. Edmundson and refuse to eat with him or speak to him. That would be unkind and discourteous and hurt

his feelings mortally. Aubrey shrank from rudeness and there was a confiding quality about Mr. Edmundson, a trusting belief that he was being good company which it would be dreadfully cruel to shatter. It was all Aubrey's own fault anyhow for having encouraged him in the first place. The only thing was to put up with things as they were for this evening and, he supposed, most of the next day and leave thankfully on the Rapide the next night. He had already arranged about his ticket and sleeper with the porter.

Mr. Edmundson banished melancholy by shrugging his shoulders, shooting his cuffs and giving a jolly laugh. "Anyway," he said, "it's all right about the baby's spots! I had a telegram this evening. The doctor said it was nothing but a rash, which only goes to show that there's no sense in being fussy until you know you've got something to be really fussy about. But that's typical of Nora, that's Leonard's wife, she's like that over everything, fuss, fuss, fuss. Sometimes I don't know how Len stands it and that's a fact; fortunately his head's screwed on the right way; it takes more than a few spots on baby's bottom to upset *his* apple-cart!"

Mr. Edmundson continued to be gay throughout dinner. He ordered a bottle of Swiss wine just to celebrate, "Hail and Farewell you know!" After dinner they went to the Kursaal and sat through an old and rather dull German movie. Mr. Edmundson seemed to enjoy it enormously and actually laughed once or twice, which irritated Aubrey, as he knew Mr. Edmundson understood

German as little as he did. In the foyer on the way out a man in a bowler hat with a very foreign accent asked Mr. Edmundson for a light. "Right you are, me old cock robin," said Mr. Edmundson, and slapped him on the back. Aubrey hung his head in shame.

The next morning Aubrey woke with a great sense of relief, only one more day, one more lunch, one more dinner and then escape. He was careful, while dressing, not to venture out on to the balcony and, with amazing luck, managed to get out of the hotel and into town without seeing Mr. Edmundson at all. He chose a table, partially screened by a flowering shrub, outside the "Bienvenue," where he had sat the first afternoon of his arrival. It seemed incredible that it was only the day before yesterday—he felt as though he'd been living with Mr. Edmundson for weeks. The scene before him was as light and varied as ever, but he found after a while that he was looking at it with different eyes. A lot of the charm, the glitter of potential adventure had faded. He felt like some passionate virgin who had just had her first love affair and discovered it to have been both uncomfortable and dull. Rather pleased with this simile he jotted it down on the back of an envelope that he happened to have in his pocket. For instance, now, with this new, cynical disillusionment, he was certain that the man walking by with the pretty girl in a yellow beret was *not* her lover and had *not* just broken his leave in order to fly from Brussels to see her. Nor was the heavily made-up woman encased in black satin and wearing high-heeled

white shoes the depraved Madame of a Brothel who had amassed a fortune out of the White Slave Traffic. Nor even was the ferrety looking man in the grey raincoat carrying a violin case a secret agent. He was just a family man with five children. The made-up woman was probably the mother of six and the man and the girl were brother and sister and bored to tears with each other.

Elvira was wrong and so, damn it, was Somerset Maugham. The prospect of going through life alone in hotels and running the risk of meeting a series of Mr. Edmundsons was too awful to be contemplated. If that was the only way to gain material and inspiration he'd rather go back to antiques or write another play about his own family.

It depressed him to think that a man could live for fifty-four years like Mr. Edmundson and have nothing of the faintest interest happen to him at all beyond a problematical stone in the bladder. Of course, he fully realised that a great writer with technique, humanity, warmth and vivid insight, such as Arnold Bennett, could make Mr. Edmundson an appealing hero for several hundred pages, but he himself felt that even though, in the far future, he should become a successful author, that sort of thing would, most emphatically, not be his line. He sipped a cup of delicious chocolate, with a large blob of cream on the top and anticipated the pleasures of Venice. He would sit on the terrace of a hotel on the Grand Canal and watch the sun setting over the lagoon, if it did, and the gondolas drifting by, and he wouldn't

speak a word to anyone at all in any circumstances whatever unless they looked so madly attractive that he couldn't restrain himself.

He finished his chocolate, paid for it, scanned the horizon carefully and got up. There was an antique shop in a side street that he had noticed on his way to the café with some rather nice things in the window, and he thought he might go in and poke about a bit. He gave a little sigh. If only Maurice hadn't been so tiresome and were here with him, what fun it would be. But still, if Maurice hadn't been tiresome he would never have written *Animal Grab* and wouldn't be here at all, so there was no sense in being wistful about that. He turned up the little side street and shot back into an archway while Mr. Edmundson, fortunately looking the other way, passed within a few inches of him. Aubrey giggled with relief at his escape and fairly scampered off to the antique shop. The man in the shop greeted him politely. His English was very bad and Aubrey was certain he had heard his voice and seen his face before. He routed about for nearly an hour, not finding anything of interest apart from a very lovely Italian mirror that would have made Maurice's mouth water and some bits of rather fakey looking cinque cento jewellery. He bought a pair of malachite earrings for sixteen francs for Elvira, and was on his way out when his eye was caught by a small wooden Madonna. It was probably not older than eighteenth century or the beginning of nineteenth and had once been painted in bright colours, but most of the

paint had either faded or been rubbed off, giving the figure a pale almost ethereal quality. It was obviously of no particular value but certainly quite charming and might make a nice present for someone. He asked the man the price and was astonished to hear that it was two hundred francs. The man went off into a long rigmarole about it being very old and having belonged to the famous Marchesa something or other, but Aubrey, who wouldn't have paid more than ten shillings for it at most, cut him short with a polite bow and went out. On his way back to the hotel he suddenly remembered where he had seen the man before and gave a little gasp of remembered embarrassment. It was the man who had asked for a light in the foyer of the cinema last night, and to whom Mr. Edmundson with agonising heartiness had said, "Right you are, me old cock robin!"

As he was walking through the lounge the under-waiter who generally served their coffee after dinner stopped him with the information that his uncle was waiting for him in the bar. Aubrey laughed, repressing a shudder at the thought. "That's not my uncle," he said, "that's Mr. Edmundson." The waiter bowed politely and Aubrey went up to his room to wash.

At lunch Mr. Edmundson seemed a little less animated than usual. Aubrey, feeling that he could afford to be magnanimous as there were only a few more hours to go, explained that the reason he hadn't seen him during the morning was that he had to get up early to go to Cook's about his passport and do a little shopping in the town.

He told him about the antique shop and also, with a little edge of malice, about recognising the man. "You remember," he said, "the one you nearly knocked down in the Kursaal last night." Mr. Edmundson had the grace to look rather startled for a moment and then gave a shamefaced laugh. "I think I was a bit over the odds last night," he said. "That Swiss wine and the brandy after dinner." Then he changed the subject.

4

Mr. Edmundson insisted on coming with Aubrey to the station, merrily waving aside all protests. In the hotel bus his conversation was more domestic than ever. Apparently an aunt of Mrs. Edmundson's, hitherto concealed from Aubrey, had been living with them for nearly two years and was nothing more nor less than a damned nuisance. One of those whining women, always on the grumble and always causing trouble with the servants. They'd had altogether five parlour-maids since she'd been in the house and now the present one was leaving, having told Mrs. Edmundson candidly that she just couldn't stand it and that was a fact. When the bus reached the station Mr. Edmundson was seriously considering whether or not it wouldn't be better and cheaper in the long run to set up the aunt on her own in a little flat in some seaside resort such as Herne Bay or Broadstairs. "After all," he said, "it

isn't as if she's all that old, seventy-three's getting on I grant you, but she's in full possession of all her faculties, a bloody sight too full if you ask me, and she could live her own life and do what she pleased and grumble to her heart's content."

When Aubrey had got himself and his bags into his sleeper there were still a few minutes to spare before the train went, which Mr. Edmundson utilised by sitting on the bed and reverting briefly to the subject of Mrs. Edmundson's teeth. At last a whistle blew and he jumped up. "Well, bye-bye, old man," he said. "It's been jolly nice to have known you." Then, to Aubrey's embarrassment, he plunged his hand into the pocket of his coat and produced a small brown paper package. "I've bought you this this afternoon in the town just as a little souvenir. I know you like that sort of thing. No——" he held up his hand—"don't start thanking me, it isn't anything at all, just look at it every now and then and think of me and be good." The train started to move, and he dashed down the corridor and out on to the platform. Aubrey, feeling guilty and ashamed, opened the package and was appalled to discover that it was the little wooden Madonna he had seen in the antique shop that morning. He turned it over in his hands; the head had been broken off at some time or other and been stuck on again. Two hundred Swiss francs! That was about ten pounds! He closed his eyes and felt himself blushing with mortification at the cruel thoughts he had harboured against Mr. Edmundson.

Poor Mr. Edmundson. Pathetic Mr. Edmundson. That was the worst of bores, they always turned out to have hearts of gold; it was awful. He undressed pensively and went to bed. In the night he half wakened by the figure of a man stretching across to his luggage on the rack. Drowsily he realised that the train must be at the Italian Frontier.

"Nothing to declare," he muttered.

The man went away and he went to sleep again.

The next day, about a half an hour before the train was due to arrive in Venice, he unwrapped the Madonna again, which had been lying in the rack, and was in the act of putting it into his suit-case among his dirty washing when the head fell off and rolled under the seat. This tickled him enormously; he sat down and laughed until he cried. It really was too sad—poor Mr. Edmundson. He retrieved the head and tried to fix it on again, but it wouldn't stick without glue. The body was hollow and he shook it upside down just to see whether or not any priceless jewels might have been concealed inside, but it was quite empty. People like Mr. Edmundson, he reflected, are born unlucky, they can't even give a present without it being a failure.

Mr. Edmundson, on leaving the station, walked briskly down to the lake side and turned into the Bienvenue Café. It wasn't very crowded, but the air was smoky and thick and the radio was turned on full. He sat down and ordered a beer and an evening paper. Two men

in bowler hats were seated at a table opposite to him playing dominoes, one of them was the proprietor of the antique shop. After a little while he looked across at Mr. Edmundson and raised his eyebrows enquiringly. Mr. Edmundson looked casually round the room, nodded briefly, and went on reading his paper.

Traveller's Joy

LEROY STREET started high up in the social scale, just off Vernon Square where the Boots' Cash Chemists was, and the Kardomah Café and the new Regal Cinema, but it deteriorated just about in the middle, where the houses, although the same size as those further up, seemed to lose caste subtly, like respectable women who are beginning to take to drink. Towards the end of the street all pretensions died, and it wandered inconclusively in squalor out into the waste land behind the town among slag heaps, piles of rubbish, broken bits of Ford cars rusting in the weather, and marshy ponds lying stagnant by the side of the canal.

The Theatre Royal was in the High Street, and although it backed practically on to the garden of Number Fourteen, you had to walk right up into Vernon Square and round and down again before you got to it. Herbert Darrell could actually see into his 'combined' on the first floor if he turned his head while he was making up. It irritated him sometimes to see Miss Bramble fussing about among his things; he had to repress an impulse to yell at her from the dressing-room window, but, he told himself, these sudden bursts of annoyance

were only liver, and so he controlled himself and took an extra sip of Guinness as a nerve soother. He generally had a little rule by which he limited himself to only one glass before the first act. It was a game he played, resisting small temptations, and he had it all laid out beautifully. Two or three gulps before starting to make up, two or three more after the foundation had been put on (Numbers Five, Three, and Nine, Leichner always), then a nice long draught before he put on his eyes and mouth, leaving just a little at the bottom of the glass to give a final tickle to the gullet before going down on to the stage.

Not having much imagination, the signs of age in his face depressed him rarely. On the whole it seemed to him to look much the same as it always had. Of course there were more lines and the eyes were a bit puffy underneath, but there was still a glint in them all right. He sometimes winked archly in the glass just to prove it and also, when dressing alone, he occasionally indulged in his 'Passion' face. This was one of his triumphs of the past. A slight projection of the head, half-closed eyes swimming with desire, and an almost imperceptible dilating of the nostrils. In the garden scene in *Lady Mary's Love Affair* in nineteen hundred and four, that particular expression had caused a considerable sensation. He had been hailed, for a time, as one of the great lovers of the stage. Now, in nineteen thirty-four, he still used it, but with a deliberate slackening of intensity, a gallant middle-aged mellowness. He was no fool, he often told

himself, none of that painful mutton-dressed-as-lamb business for him! Why, he had voluntarily given up playing Juveniles years ago when he was a bare forty-five.

Just before the end of the performance every night, during his wait in the last act, he usually gave way to a little misty retrospection. Misty, owing to the fact that his fourth Guinness was standing at his elbow. It was pleasant to review the past without anger or bitterness, although God knows he had cause enough for bitterness; the Theatre going to the dogs as it was and all these inexperienced muttering young actors playing leading parts in the West End. But he was all right, pretty contented on the whole, generally in work and with enough money saved to tide him over the bleak periods between tours. Just every now and then, quite unaccountably, in the middle of the night, or riding along on the top of a bus, awareness of failure plunged at him like a sword; twisting in his consciousness cruelly as though it had been lying in wait to murder his self-respect and puncture and wound his pleasure in himself. These searing moments were fortunately rare and passed away as swiftly as they came. There was always something to do, some amiable method of passing the time. Life was full of small opportunities of enjoyment; the sudden meeting of an old friend on a train call for instance, the hurried furtive Guinness in the pub opposite the station with one eye on the clock. Hashing over the past lightly enough not to rumple the dust

of illusion, which, more and more as the years advanced, was settling deeper upon it. Every gay episode was, by now, over-coloured into vivid relief, magnified beyond all proportion of its actual happening. Every bad moment was trodden into the lower darkness. Short runs. Bad Press notices. The losing of jobs after perhaps a week's rehearsal. 'I'm afraid, Mr. Darrell, you are really not quite suited to this part.' Agonies such as these had been too swift and sudden to be dodged immediately. Egos, however strong and truculent, must be allowed a little time to summon their forces, and the moments between the actual shock and the soothing palliative of a drink, were frequently unbearably long, little grey eternities stretching from the stage door to the nearest pub, with the head averted so that passers-by should not catch the glimmer of unmanly, mortified tears. These happenings lay low in his mind, fathoms deep, like strange twisted creatures that inhabit the depths of the sea; blind and unbelieved and only horrible when some unforeseen tidal disturbance brings them to the surface. In these awful moments Herbert Darrell turned tail and ran, stumbling, panic-stricken and breathless until exhaustion outstripped the pursuit and he could relax with some acquaintance, not even a friend was necessary, and preen his draggled feathers; fluffing them out bravely and crowing a little, weakly at first, until the second or third drink gurgled smoothly into his stomach and drowned his fears.

His digs in Leroy Street were really very good.

Better and cleaner than Mrs. Blockley's in Nottingham that everyone went on so much about. They were cheaper too. Mrs. Blockley was too bloody grand, and even if the Martin Harveys had stayed there once there was no need to make such a song and dance about it. Here, at Number Fourteen there were no star memories. No eminent ghosts in Shakesperean tights leered down from the mantelpiece. There were, in point of fact, very few photographs, which was a relief. Only one group of Miss Bramble's mother and father and elder sister, and a tinted enlargement of Miss Bramble herself as a girl. A very pretty girl she must have been too, sitting down on a sofa with her humped back cunningly obscured by a jagged cloud of pink tulle. It was only a very slight hump, anyhow, poor thing. Herbert Darrell regarded her with a pity that he was careful not to let her see, his manner to her being occasionally quite brusque in consequence. She must be, he thought, round about the middle-forties now. Her eyes and skin were still young and her mouth, at certain moments, attractive but over full, with a lift of the upper lip which might have denoted sensuality in anyone else, but Miss Bramble; poor dear, what chance had she had for that sort of thing with her deformed back and little spindly legs. He wondered if she minded. Minded as much as he would have under the circumstances. His imagination baulked at the idea of himself, Herbert Darrell, not being physically attractive. It was difficult to conceive a life utterly devoid of 'That sort of thing.' Poor Miss Bramble!

When remembering his past loves he allowed his face to slide into a whimsical smile. Women, many of them nameless, held out their arms to him across the years. He could still recapture the sensation of their smooth bodies in his arms; hear the echo of their small whimpering cries under his lips. A procession of incompletely identified bedrooms passed slowly before his mind's eye, like rather foggy lantern slides projected on to a screen. Dressing-tables. Wardrobes. Chintz curtains. Lace curtains. Silk and velvet curtains. Small tables. Scent bottles. Little feminine clocks ticking away complacently, unmoved by desire or fulfilment or ecstasy. Beds of all shapes and sizes. Doubles, Singles. With canopies. Without canopies. One with a little naked Cupid dangling a light just above his head. Another with a gilt bird catching up mauve taffeta in its claws. That must have been Julia Deacon's, either hers or Marion Cressal's. Funny how he always got those two muddled up. They had both been high spots, definite triumphs for him. Both well kept and difficult to attain. Then there was Minnie. Here his mind shied in the darkness because he had married Minnie and memories of her were clearer and less glamorous. The first two years had been all right. Quite a nice little flat they had had in New Cavendish Street. He had been playing *Captain Draycott* then, his last success in the West End. Then things had begun to slide, gradually at first, then three failures on top of one another, forcing him out into the provinces with the tour of *Captain Draycott*,

starting with the number one towns and finishing, the following year, with an undignified scamper through the number threes. Penarth had been the worst, he remembered. So near Cardiff and yet so far. The reason that it had been the worst had been because of Minnie. It was in Penarth that he had seen her strongly and clearly for the first time as a bitch. His memory lifted its skirts over this bad patch and hurried convulsively, like an old lady picking her way barefoot across a shingly beach. The digs just near the pier. Billy Jenner's party at the hotel on the Thursday night to celebrate his having fixed a job at Wyndham's for the autumn. Then suddenly feeling ill and going home early and hearing Minnie's 'Oh Christ!' as he turned the handle of the bedroom door.

Herbert Darrell turned over heavily in Miss Bramble's combined room bed and went to sleep.

On Sunday morning the alarum clock dragged Miss Bramble out of a deep tranquil dream at seven o'clock precisely, and she lay for a while blinking at the ceiling and trying to locate a pain somewhere in her inside. Not a physical pain; not even a pain at all really, more a sensation of loss, vague and undefined, as though someone she loved had died and she couldn't quite remember who it was. Sleep still pulled at her eyes, and she turned her head sharply on the pillow; staring at the room until the worn familiarity of everything in it wakened her to reality and sent the last clinging vestiges of her dream

sliding back into the night. The acorn knob on the end of the blind cord rapped intermittently against the wainscotting because the window was open a little at the top, and the chintz strip on her dressing-table twitched irritably in the draught. She had left the top off her box of Houbigant powder and the edges of stiff paper sticking up inside it looked like a face, somebody lying down asleep, or perhaps dead. A beam of light shooting from behind the blind caught the bristles of her hair-brush showing a few fuzzy hairs with a surprisingly blonde glint on them, and she noticed, with a pang, that the small framed photograph of her mother had fallen over on its face. This got her out of bed with a jerk, and when she had set it upright again and caught sight of herself in the glass, full and complete memory of last night struck at her savagely. Just as a flash of lightning sears against the sky every detail of a landscape, she saw, in an instant, the bright wall-paper of the 'combined' room and the heavy blue-and-white stripes of Mr. Darrell's pyjamas.

Still looking in the glass she put out her hand to steady herself and noted, mechanically, a red flush creeping up from under her Celanese nightgown and suffusing her face. Then she sat down suddenly on the dressing-table chair and felt sick. After a little she went over to the bed again and sat on the edge of that, feeling the linoleum ice-cold under her bare toes. The bland Woolworth clock announced six minutes past seven. At a quarter to eight he was to be called, with a cup

of tea and a boiled egg, because the company was going on to Derby and the train went at nine. At a quarter to eight she would be in that room again. She would open the door, after a discreet knock, and walk in as though nothing had happened at all. Just as last night she had walked in in answer to his bell bringing him nothing but her starved and stunted little body; this morning she would bring him a cup of tea and a boiled egg.

She got up from the bed and started to dress feverishly; the cold water splashed over the edge of the basin as she poured it out of the jug and she whimpered a little, making a clucking noise with her tongue against her teeth. A lot of things went wrong with her dressing. Her hair pulled and wouldn't stay up properly. She put her blouse on inside out and had to struggle out of it and into it again, and the button came off one of her strap shoes. Her face looked redder than ever in the glass, and even when she had rubbed in a lot of Icilma vanishing cream and dabbed it generously with the puff, it still flamed shamefully. Finally she got herself downstairs to the kitchen with her loose shoe strap flapping on every step.

At twenty minutes to eight she absent-mindedly ate one of the bits of toast she had made and had to do another piece hurriedly. He liked his egg done four minutes, and she stood over the gas-stove watching it bobbing about in the saucepan jumping up and down again and rolling over and over impudently as though it were mocking her. Nellie wouldn't arrive to do

the rooms until nine-thirty, if then, it being Sunday; she would have the house to herself for a bit when he'd gone, when the taxi had rattled him out of her life together with his two fibre suit-cases, his bulgy Gladstone bag and his dark blue Aquascutum mackintosh with the grease marks on the inside of the collar. She glanced at it hanging up in the hall as she passed along with the tray. It looked tired and depressed, and one of the little sockets at the side was broken, causing the belt to hang down on to the floor like a snake.

She mounted the stairs slowly and carefully; the geyser snorted at her as she passed the bathroom door and one of the stair-rods rattled loose as her feet touched it, nearly tripping her up. At last she stood outside his door waiting for a moment for the courage to knock, and listening to the beating of her heart, the only sound in the silent house. It was lucky there weren't any other lodgers this week. She couldn't have borne that; other rooms to enter, other breakfasts to get. It was very silly, she felt, just to go on standing there outside the door letting his tea and his egg get cold; she balanced the tray in her right hand and lifted her left to knock, then she lowered it again and with a little shiver, sat down on the top step of the stairs putting the tray carefully down beside her. The blind of the landing window was not drawn, and she could see out across the roofs to where the spire of St. Catherine's stood up against the grey sky. It was raining a little. She remembered the very first time she had seen that view, from the

small room at the top of the house which she had always had when she came to stay with Aunt Alice. She was fifteen then and Aunt Alice, although rather grim and domineering, had been very kind on the whole. Now she was dead and lying in St. Catherine's churchyard, possibly tormented by the knowledge that her clean, respectable boarding-house had dwindled slowly, in the hands of her niece, from gentility and social pride into theatrical lodgings. Miss Bramble often thought of this. She often regretted the hard circumstances and lack of stamina which had caused her to deal so shabbily with Aunt Alice's bequest. Theatrical people, according to Aunt Alice, were a worthless lot, possessing little or no moral sense and seldom any religion whatsoever. Miss Bramble wondered dimly what Aunt Alice would say if she knew that her favourite niece, deformity or no deformity, had become so lost to all sense of what was right and proper as to allow herself to be seduced, at the age of forty-four, by an elderly actor in the second floor back. Again she shivered, this time with the sudden chill of clear realisation that she wanted him again, that every nerve in her body was tingling with an agony of desire. She recaptured, behind her closed eyes, the strength of his arms round her; the roughness of his face against her neck and the weight of his body crushing her down deep into an ecstasy sweeter than any she had ever dreamed. It was the "being in love" of all the people in the world. The essence of every love scene from every movie and play she had ever been to, concentrated

miraculously in her. And now, now the moment had gone, no more of it, no more of it ever again in her life probably. The ordinary way of things would continue; shopping, cooking, washing up, welcoming lodgers, saying "good-bye" to lodgers. . . . This very afternoon Mabel Hodge was coming and a new couple, Mr. and Mrs. Burrell, whom she had never had before. They were all in the same show at the Royal, *Disappearance*, Direct from the Shaftesbury Theatre, London. The Burrells would have the ground floor front with sitting-room, and Mabel Hodge, the "Combined." She had had it several times before; her silly face had greeted Miss Bramble many a morning when she had gone in with her glass of hot water—"It must be fraightfully, fraightfully hot, Miss Bramble dear, with just the teeniest slaice of lemon"—She remembered thinking once that Mabel Hodge's face was like one of the fancy cakes in Jones's window in the High Street, one that had been there for a long time until the sugar had melted a bit at the edges, and being ashamed of herself afterwards for being so uncharitable. It was because of Mabel Hodge that she had had the gas-fire put in. She had always grumbled so about the cold, and Nellie letting the fire out, and one thing and another. . . .

Once more a surge of pain engulfed her. The gas-fire had been on last night. In the first moment of putting the light out it hadn't been noticeable at all, and then, gradually, the warm glow of it had spread, throwing a vast shadow of the armchair

against the wall. She had opened her eyes to that shadow just once or twice and then closed them again.

The Town Hall clock struck the quarter and, a few seconds later, the clock downstairs did the same, a feeble little noise it made with a convulsive whirr before and after as though it had a cold. Miss Bramble rose to her feet, picked up the tray and walked into the "Combined" forgetting, in the sudden urgency of her decision, to knock at all.

Herbert Darrell was lying on his back with his head turned away towards the wall. His mouth was open and he was breathing stertoriously; the top button of his pyjama jacket was undone, and a tangle of wispy, greyish hairs rose and fell languidly with the movement of his chest. Miss Bramble put the tray on the table and jerked the blind; the cord escaped her fingers and it went flying up with a tremendous clatter, whirling round and round itself at the top.

Herbert Darrell moved uneasily and opened his eyes, and he had said "good morning" huskily before she could detect any memory in them. She said quite firmly, but in somebody else's voice, that she was sorry that she was a bit late but that the fire had refused to light properly. He sat up at this, and then she saw him frown and look at her suddenly, blinking. No kind intentions, not all the practised graces of the world could have concealed that expression in time. It was the look she was waiting for and when it came,

cutting straight through her heart and out through her hump at the back, she greeted it with an excellent smile. "I'll go and light the geyser," she said, and went jauntily out of the room.

Aunt Tittie

I

ONCE upon a time in a small fishing village in Cornwall there lived a devout and angry clergyman named Clement Shore. He was an ex-missionary and had a face almost entirely encircled by whiskers, like a frilled ham. His wife, Mary, was small and weary, and gave birth to three daughters, Christina, Titania, and lastly Amanda, with whose birth she struggled too long and sadly, and died, exhausted by the effort. Amanda was my mother. On Christmas day 1881, Grandfather Clement himself died and my Aunt Christina then aged sixteen, having arranged for what furniture there was to be sold, and the lease of the house taken over, travelled to London with several tin trunks, a fox terrier named Roland and her two younger sisters aged respectively thirteen and eleven. They were met, dismally, at Paddington by their father's spinster sister Ernesta, a grey woman of about fifty, who led them, without protest, to Lupus Street, Pimlico, where with a certain grim efficiency she ran a lodging house for bachelors. Once installed they automatically became insignificant but important cog-wheels in the smooth

running machinery of the house, which was very high and respectable. The three of them shared a small bedroom with Roland, from whom they refused to be parted, and lived two years of polite slavery until in the spring of 1883 Christina suddenly married James Rogers, Ernesta Shore's first-floor-front tenant, and went with him to a small house in Camberwell, taking with her Titania and Amanda.

James Rogers was a good man and a piano tuner at the time of his marriage, later he developed into a travelling agent for his firm, so that during my childhood in the house I didn't see much of him; but he was mild tempered and kind when he did happen to be at home and only drank occasionally, and then without exuberance.

Aunt Christina was formidable, even when young, and ruled him firmly until the day of his death. She was less successful however with Aunt Titania and my mother. Aunt Titania stayed the course for about a year and then eloped to Manchester with a young music hall comedian, Jumbo Potter, with whom she lived in sin for three years to the bitter shame of Aunt Christina. At the end of this liaison she went on to the stage herself in company with three other girls. They called themselves "The Four Rosebuds" and danced and sang through the music halls of England. Meanwhile my mother, Amanda, continued to live in Camberwell, helping with the housework and behaving very well until 1888, when Titania reappeared in London, swathed in the glamour of the Theatre, and

invited her to a theatrical supper party at the Monico. Amanda climbed out of her bedroom window and over the yard fence in order to get there and never returned. Titania on being questioned later by Christina stated that the last she'd seen of Amanda, she was seated on the knee of an Argentine with a paper fireman's cap on her head, blowing a squeaker. Titania's recollections were naturally somewhat vague as she had been drinking a good deal and left the party early on the strength of an unpremeditated reunion with Jumbo Potter. Christina anxiously pursued her enquiries, but could discover nothing about the Argentine; nobody knew his name, he had apparently drifted into the party, entirely uninvited. Finally when two days had elapsed and she was about to go to the police, a telegram arrived from Amanda saying that she was at Ostend and that it was lovely and that nobody was to worry about her and that she was writing. A few weeks later she did write, briefly, this time from Brussels, she said she was staying with a friend, Madame Vaudrin, who was very nice and there were lots of other girls in the house, and it was all great fun, and nobody was to worry about her as she was very, very happy.

For five years after that, neither Titania nor Christina heard from her at all until suddenly, just before Christmas 1893, she appeared at Christina's house in Camberwell in a carriage and pair. She was dressed superbly and caused a great sensation in the neighbourhood. Christina received her coldly but finally melted when Amanda offered to pay off all the instalments on the new drawing-

room set and gave her a cheque for twenty-five pounds as well. Titania by this time had married Jumbo Potter and Amanda gave a family Christmas dinner party at the Grosvenor Hotel where she was staying, and as a *bonne bouche* at the end of the meal, produced an Indian Prince who gave everybody jewellery. She stayed in London for six weeks and then went to Paris, still with her Prince, and spent a riotous month or two, until finally she accompanied him to Marseilles where he took ship for India leaving her sobbing picturesquely on the dock with a cabuchon emerald and a return ticket for Paris. It was while she was on the platform awaiting the Paris train that she met my father, Sir Douglas Kane-Jones. He was a prosperous-looking man of about fifty, returning on leave from Delhi to visit his wife and family in Exeter. However he postponed his homecoming for three weeks in order to enjoy Paris with Amanda. Finally they parted, apparently without much heart-break, he for England, and she for Warsaw, whither she had been invited by a Russian girl she had met in Brussels, Nadia Kolenska. Nadia had been living luxuriously in Warsaw for a year as the guest of a young attaché to the French Embassy. Upon arrival in Warsaw, Amanda was provided with a charming suite of rooms and several admirers, and was enjoying herself greatly when to her profound irritation, she discovered she was going to have a child.

She and Nadia, I believe, did everything they could think of to get rid of it but without success, and so

Amanda decided to continue to enjoy life for as long as she could and then return to England. Unfortunately, however, she left it rather late, and on a frozen morning in January, I was born in a railway carriage somewhere between Warsaw and Berlin. The reason for my abrupt arrival several weeks earlier than was expected was the sudden jolting of the train while my mother was on her way back from the lavatory to her compartment. She fell violently over a valise that someone had left in the corridor, and two hours later, much to everyone's embarrassment and discomfort, I was born and laid in the luggage rack wrapped in a plaid travelling rug.

A week later Aunt Christina arrived in Berlin in response to a telegram, just in time to see my mother die in a hospital ward. With her usual prompt efficiency she collected all my mother's personal effects, which were considerable, and having ascertained that there were no savings in any bank, took me back to England with her and ensconced me in her own bedroom in her new house, Number 17, Cranberry Avenue, Kennington.

2

My life until my Uncle James Rogers' death in 1904 was as eventful for me as it is for most children who are learning to walk and talk and become aware of things. A few incidents remain in my memory. Notably, a meeting with my Aunt Titania when I was about three. She

smelt strongly of scent and her hair was bright yellow. She bounced me gaily on her knee until I was sick, after which, she seemed to lose interest in me. I remember also, when I was a little older, my Uncle Jim came into my room late at night. I awoke just in time to see him go over to the mantelpiece and throw two green china vases on to the floor. I cried a lot because I was frightened, Aunt Christina cried too and finally soothed me to sleep again by singing hymns softly and saying prayers.

When I was five I was sent to a kindergarten on week-days, and a Sunday School on Sunday afternoons. A Miss Brace kept the kindergarten. She wore shirt blouses with puffed sleeves, and tartan skirts. Her hair was done up over a pad. Twice a week we had drawing lessons and were allowed to use coloured chalks. I didn't care for any of the other children, and disliked the little girls particularly because they used to squabble during play-time, and pull each other's hair, and cry at the least thing.

I enjoyed the Sunday School much more because we used to stand in a circle and sing hymns, and the teacher had a large illustrated Bible which had a picture of God the Father throwing a hen out of Heaven, and another one of Jesus, with his apostles, sitting at a large table and eating india-rubber rolls. Everybody had beards and white nightgowns, and looked very funny.

When I was nine, Uncle Jim died. All the blinds in the house were pulled down, and we walked about softly as though he were only asleep and we were afraid of

waking him. Iris, the servant, who had only been with us for two weeks, trailed up and down the stairs miserably with woebegone tears streaking her face. Perhaps she cried as a natural compliment to bereavement, however remote from herself, or perhaps she was merely frightened. Even the cat seemed depressed and lay under the sofa for hours at a time in a sort of coma. Aunt Christina took me in to see Uncle Jim lying in bed covered with a sheet up to his chin, his eyes were closed, and his face was yellow like tallow, his nose looked as though someone had pinched it. Aunt Christina walked firmly up to the bed, and having straightened the end of the sheet, bent down and kissed him on the forehead so suddenly that I'm sure he would have jumped if he had been alive. Then she looked across at me and said that his spirit had gone to heaven. Outside in the street a barrel organ was playing and there were some children yelling a little way off, but these sounds seemed faint and unreal as though I were listening to them from inside a box.

I went to the funeral with Aunt Christina and Aunt Titania in a closed carriage which smelt strongly of horses and leather. On the way Aunt Titania wanted to smoke a cigarette but Aunt Christina was very angry and wouldn't let her; I sat with my back to the horse and watched them arguing about it, sitting side by side jogging slightly as the carriage wheels bumped over the road. Finally Aunt Christina sniffed loudly and shut her mouth in a thin line and refused to say another word,

whereupon Aunt Titania leaned a little forward and looked grandly out of the window until we reached the Cemetery. I stood under a tree with her while the actual burial was going on and she gave me some peppermints out of her muff. When we got home again we all had tea and Iris made some dripping toast, but the atmosphere was strained. After tea I went down to the kitchen to help Iris with the washing up and we listened to the voices upstairs getting angrier and angrier until finally the front door slammed so loudly that all the crockery shook on the dresser. Presently we heard Aunt Christina playing hymns and I didn't see Aunt Titania again for many years.

Soon after this I went to a day school in Stockwell, it wasn't very far away and I used to go there in a 'bus and walk home. There was an enormous horse chestnut tree just inside the school gate and we used to collect the chestnuts and put them on strings and play conkers. They were rich shiny brown when we first picked them up, like the piano in our front room, but afterwards the shine wore off and they weren't nearly so nice. I hated the Headmaster who was stout and had a very hearty laugh. He insisted on everybody playing football and used to keep goal himself, shouting loudly as he jumped about. One of the under masters was freckled and kind and used to pinch my behind in the locker room when I was changing. Much as I disliked school, I disliked coming home in the evenings still more, my heart used to sink as I stood outside the front door and watched

Aunt Christina wobbling towards me through the coloured glass. She generally let me in without saying a word and I used to go straight upstairs to my bedroom and read and do my home-work until supper time, because Iris left at six and there was nobody to talk to. Aunt Christina always said grace before and after meals, and regularly, when we'd cleared away the supper things and piled them up in the kitchen, she used to play hymns and make me sing them with her. Sundays were particularly awful because I had to go to Church morning and evening, as well as to Sunday school in the afternoons. The Vicar was very skinny and while I listened to his throaty voice screeching out the sermon I used to amuse myself by counting how many times his Adam's Apple bobbed up and down behind his white collar. The woman who always sat next to us, had bad feet and the whole pew smelt of her.

I used to ask Aunt Christina about my mother but all she'd say was that Satan had got her because she was wicked, and whenever I asked about my father she said he was dead and that she had never known him.

At the beginning of 1906 when I was eleven, things became even gloomier. Aunt Christina bought a whole lot of modelling wax and made a figure of Jesus lying down, then she put red ink on it to look like blood, but it soaked in. It wasn't a very good figure anyhow; the face was horrid and the arms much too long, but she used to kiss it and croon over it. Once she tried to make me kiss it but I wouldn't, so she turned me out

into the yard. I stayed all night in the shed and caught cold. After that she wouldn't speak to me for days; I was unhappy and made plans about running away, but I hadn't any money and there was nowhere to run.

One evening in April, I came home from school and she was in bed with a terrible headache; the next morning when I went in to her room, she was gasping and saying she couldn't breathe, so I ran out and fetched a doctor. He said she had pneumonia and that we must have a nurse, so we did, and the nurse rattled about the house and clicked her tongue against her teeth a good deal and washed everything she could. Three days later Mr. Wendell, the vicar, came and stayed up in Aunt Christina's room for a time, and a short while after he'd gone the nurse came running downstairs and said I was to fetch the doctor. Just as I was leaving the house to fetch him, I met him at the gate on his way in. He went upstairs quickly and an hour later he and the nurse came down and told me that my aunt had passed away.

He asked me for Aunt Titania's address, so we looked through Aunt Christina's davenport and found it and sent her a telegram. Late that afternoon Uncle Jumbo Potter arrived and interviewed the nurse, and then took me round to the doctor's house, and he talked to him for ages while I sat in the waiting-room, and looked at the people who had come to be cured; one little boy with a bandage round his head was whimpering and his mother tried to comfort him by telling him stories. Presently Uncle Jumbo came out and took me home

with him in a cab. He lived in rooms near Victoria Station. He told me that Aunt Titania wasn't living with him any more and that she was in Paris singing at a place called the Café Bardac, and that he was going to send me to her the next day. That night I went with him to Shoreditch where he was doing his turn at the Empire. I sat in his dressing-room and watched him make up and then he took me down on to the stage and let me stand at the side with the stage manager. Uncle Jumbo was a great favourite and the audience cheered and clapped the moment he walked on to the stage. He wore a very small bowler hat and loose trousers and had a large red false nose. His songs were very quick indeed until it came to the chorus, when he slowed down and let the audience join in too. The last thing he did was a dance in which his trousers kept nearly falling off all the time. At the end he had to go before the curtain and make a speech before they'd let him go. He took me upstairs with him and undressed, still very out of breath. He sat down quite naked and smoked a cigarette, and I watched the hair on his chest glistening with sweat as he breathed. He asked me if I liked his turn and I said I loved it and he said, "Damned hard lot down here, can't get a bloody smile out of 'em, pardon me." After he'd taken his make-up off and powdered his face and dressed we went to a bar just opposite the Theatre and he drank beer with two gentlemen and a woman with a white fur, then we went home first in a tram and then a 'bus. I went to sleep in the 'bus. When we got to

his rooms he gave me a glass of soda water and made up a bed for me on the sofa.

The next morning Uncle Jumbo took me back to Aunt Christina's house. The nurse was still there, and Mrs. Harrison from next door, who kissed me a lot and told me to be a brave little man and asked me if I would like to come upstairs and see my dear Auntie; but Uncle Jumbo wouldn't let me, he said he didn't hold with kids looking at corpses because it was morbid. He helped me pack my clothes and then we got a cab and drove back to his rooms. In the afternoon he went out and left me alone and I amused myself by looking at some magazines and a large album of photographs and press cuttings about Aunt Titania and Uncle Jumbo. When he came back he had a friend with him, Mrs. Rice, who he said would take me to the station, as the train went at eight o'clock and he would be in the Theatre. Mrs. Rice was pretty and laughed a lot. We all made toast, and had tea round the fire. Mrs. Rice sat on Uncle's knee for a little and he winked at me playfully over her shoulder and said, "You tell your Aunt Tittie how pretty Mrs. Rice is, won't you?" whereupon she got up and said, "Leave off, Jumbo, you ought to be ashamed" and looked quite cross for a minute. Uncle Jumbo went off to the theatre at 5.30; he gave me five pounds and my ticket and said that he had telegraphed to Aunt Tittie to meet me at the station. He kissed me quite affectionately and said "Fancy me being fatherly!" Then he laughed loudly, tickled Mrs. Rice under the arms, and

went down the stairs whistling. When he'd gone Mrs. Rice and I went back and sat by the fire. She asked me a lot of questions about Aunt Titania but as I hadn't seen her since Uncle Jim's funeral I couldn't answer them very well. After a while she went to the cupboard and poured herself a whisky and soda, and while she was sipping it she told me all about her husband who used to beat her and one night he tied her to the bed in their rooms in Huddersfield and kept on throwing the wet sponge at her until her nightgown was soaking wet and the landlady came in and stopped him. She said she'd met Uncle Jumbo in Blackpool in the summer and that they used to go out after the show and sit on the sand dunes in the moonlight, and then her husband found out and there was an awful row, and Jumbo knocked her husband down on the pier and brought her to London on the Sunday and she hadn't seen her husband since, but she believed he was still on tour in *Miss Mittens* and hoped to God he'd stay in it and not come worrying her. She had several more whiskies and sodas before it was time to go and showed me a scar on her thigh where a collie bit her during her honeymoon in Llandudno. I looked at it politely and then she pulled her skirts down and said I was a bad boy and how old was I anyhow? I said I was eleven and she laughed and asked me if it made me feel naughty to see a pretty girl's bare leg. I said no and she said "Get along with you. I must put some powder on my nose." After a minute she came out of the bedroom, put her hat on and said we must

go. We took a cab to the station on account of my trunk and Mrs. Rice told the porter to register it through to Paris. She bought me some buns and chocolate and two magazines and put me in the train and waited to tell the guard to keep his eye on me before she kissed me and said good-bye. I waved to her all the way up the platform until she was out of sight and then sat back in my corner feeling very grown up and excited and waiting for the train to start.

That journey to Paris was momentous for me. I was alone and free for the first time, my going was in no way saddened by memories of people I'd left behind. I had left no one behind whom I could possibly miss; my school friendships were casual and I had definitely grown to hate poor Aunt Christina during the last few years of her life. I pressed my face against the cold glass of the carriage window and searched for country shapes in the darkness, trees and hills and hedges, and felt as though I should burst with joy. There were two other people in the carriage with me; a man and a woman who slept, sitting up, with their mouths open. When we reached Newhaven, the guard came and led me to the gangway of the ship and gave me in charge of one of the men on board who offered me a ham sandwich and showed me a place in the saloon where I could put my feet up and go to sleep, but I couldn't begin to sleep until the ship started although I was dead tired, so I went up on deck and watched the lights of the town receding, and the red and green harbour lamps reflected in the water and

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I looked up at the clouds scurrying across the moon, and, suddenly, like a blow in the face, loneliness struck me down. I was chilled through and through with it —I wondered what I should do if when I got to Paris Aunt Titania was dead too. I tried very hard not to cry but it was no use, I had a pretty bad fit of hysteria and everyone crowded round me and patted me and tried to comfort me with eatables, until finally one kind woman took me in charge completely and gave me some brandy which made me choke but pulled me together. Then she put me to sleep in her private cabin and I didn't wake up until we got to Dieppe. I was all right from then on, the woman's name was Roylat and she was on her way to Ceylon to visit her son who was a rubber planter. I had some tea with her in the station buffet at Dieppe and travelled with her to Paris, sleeping most of the way.

When we arrived at the Gare St. Lazare Aunt Titania was waiting at the barrier wearing a sealskin coat and a bright red hat with a veil floating from it. I said good-bye to Mrs. Roylat who kissed me, bowed to Aunt Titania and disappeared after her luggage. Aunt Titania and I had to go and sit in the Customs room for three-quarters of an hour until my trunk came in. She was pleased to see me but very cross with Jumbo for having sent me by night instead of day. She said it was damned thoughtless of him because he knew perfectly well that she never got to bed before four o'clock in the morning and to have to get up again at six-thirty was too much of a good thing; then she hugged me and said it wasn't

my fault and that we were going to have jolly times together.

At last, when the Customs man had marked my trunk, we got a cab and drove out into Paris. It had been raining and the streets were wet and shiny. The shutters on most of the shops were just being put up and waiters in their vests and trousers were polishing the tables outside the cafés. We drove across the river and along the quai Voltaire with the trees all glistening and freshly green; our cab horse nearly fell down on the slippery road as we turned up the rue Bonaparte. Aunt Tittie talked all the way about everything she'd been doing and her contract at the Café Bardac which they'd renewed for another month. She asked me if Aunt Christina had left me any money and I said I didn't know, but I gave her a letter that Jumbo had told me to give her. She pursed up her lips when she read it and then said, "It looks like I shall have to find a job for you, duckie, you'd better come along with me and see Monsieur Claude but there's no hurry, we'll talk about that later on." Finally the cab drew up before a very high house, and a little man in a shirt and trousers ran out and helped the driver down with my trunk. Aunt Tittie said something to him in French and took me up four flights of dark stairs and opened the door into a sitting-room which had a large bedroom opening out of it on one side with a feather mattress on the bed that looked like a pink balloon, and a tiny room on the other side which she said I was to have. There were lots of coloured

bows on the furniture and hundreds of photographs, lots of them fixed to the blue-striped wallpaper with ordinary pins. There was a small alcove in her bedroom with a wash-hand stand in it and a gas ring, and on the sitting-room table was a tray with some dirty glasses on it and a saucer full of cigarette-ends. Aunt Tittie took off her hat and coat and threw them on the sofa, then she ran her fingers through her hair and said, "Well, here we are. Home Sweet Home with a vengeance." Then she went out on to the landing and screamed: "Louise!" very loudly and came in again and sat down. "We'll have some coffee and rolls," she said, "then we'll go to bed until lunch time, how does that suit you?" I said it suited me very well and we lapsed into silence until Louise came. Louise was about seventeen with a pallid face, a dirty pink dress turned up under an apron, and green felt slippers, her hair was bristling with curl-papers. Aunt Tittie had a long conversation with her in French and then the little man came clambering upstairs with my trunk and put it in my room. Then Louise and he both disappeared and I was left alone again with Aunt Tittie. I felt rather strange and oddly enough a little homesick, not really homesickness for that dreary house in Kennington, but a longing for something familiar. Aunt Tittie must have sensed that I wasn't feeling too happy because she put her arm round me and hugged me. "It's funny, isn't it?" she said, "you arriving suddenly like this? You must tell me all about poor Aunt Christina and what you've been learning at school and everything,

and you haven't got any cause to worry about anything because you're going to be company for me and I shall love having you here." Then she held me close to her for a moment and surprisingly burst out crying, she fumbled for her handkerchief in her belt and went into the bedroom and shut the door. I didn't know what to do quite, so I started to unpack my trunk. Presently Louise returned with a tray of coffee and rolls and butter; she plumped it down on the table and screamed something at Aunt Tittie through the door and went out again. I sat at the table and waited until Aunt Tittie came out of the bedroom in a long blue quilted satin dressing-gown, with her hair down. She looked quite cheerful again. "I can't think what made me burst out like that," she said as she seated herself at the table. "It came over me all of a sudden about you being all alone in the world and your poor mother dying in childbirth and now Christina. We're the only ones left out of the whole lot and that's a fact. Two lumps?" She poured out coffee for us both and talked volubly all the time, a stream of scattered remarks, beginnings of stories, references to people I'd never heard of, all jumbled together incoherently, but somehow all seeming to fit into a sort of pattern.

She must have been about forty then, her hair had been re-dyed so often that it was entirely metallic, as bright as new brass fire-irons. Her face was pretty with a slightly retroussé nose and wide-set blue-grey eyes, her mouth was generous and large and gay when she

laughed. She talked of Jumbo a good deal, irritably, but with underlying tenderness, I suspect that she always loved him more than anyone else. She asked me if I'd seen Mrs. Rice and said that she was sorry for any man that got tangled up with a clinging vine of that sort. After breakfast, and when she'd smoked two or three cigarettes, she said she was going to bed until one o'clock and that I could do what I liked, but that she strongly advised me to go to bed too as I was probably more tired after my journey than I thought I was.

I went into my little room and when I'd finished unpacking I sat and looked out of the window for a while. It was at the back of the house looking down into a courtyard, the sun was shining into the rooms on the other side of the court, in one of them I saw an old woman in a blue dressing-gown working a sewing machine, the whirr of it sounded very loud, and every now and then there was the noise of rattling crockery far down on the ground floor, and somebody singing.

There were lots of grey roofs and chimney-pots and several birds flying about and perching on the telegraph wires, which stretched right across into the next street and then were hidden by a tall many-windowed building that looked like some sort of factory. I felt very drowsy and quite happy so I went and lay down on the bed and the next thing I knew was that it was lunch time and Aunt Tittie was shaking me gently and telling me to get up. She was still in her dressing-gown, but her head was done up in a towel because she'd just washed her hair.

We had hot chicken and vegetables and salad for lunch and fresh crusty bread and coffee. When we'd finished Aunt Tittie stretched herself out on the sofa and then moved her legs so as to make room for me on the end of it.

"Now we'd better talk a bit," she said. "I had a good think while I was washing my head and if you'll listen carefully I'll tell you just how things stand and then we'll decide what's best to be done." I settled myself more comfortably and handed her the matches off the table which she was reaching out for. "To begin with," she said, "I haven't got any money except what I earn, but we can both live on that if we're careful anyhow for a bit, until you start to make a little on your own. I know I ought to send you to school really but I can't; it's none too easy living in this damned town, because you've got to look smart and have nice clothes otherwise nobody will take any notice of you. Now I've got an idea which I'll have to talk over with Mattie Gibbons, she's my partner. We do a parasol dance, and then she does her skipping rope speciality which is fine; then I sing a ballad, one verse and chorus in English and the second verse and chorus in French and then we do a number together called 'How would you like a rose like me?' and go round to all the tables giving the men paper roses out of a basket. My idea was that you should be dressed up as a little dandy with a silk hat and a cane and gloves, you know the sort of thing, and flirt with us during the Parasol dance and bring on our props for

us all through the act. If Mattie agrees we'll ask Monsieur Claude about it. I think he'll say yes because he's a bit keen on me if you know what I mean and you ought to get about fifteen francs a week which would be a help to begin with. Would you like that?"

I said eagerly that I'd love it better than anything in the world and flung my arms round her neck and kissed her and she said, "Here wait a minute, it isn't settled yet, we've got to talk to Mattie and Monsieur Claude and arrange hundreds of things. I shall have to tell you a whole lot you're really too young to know, before I let you loose in the Café Bardac; to start with how much do you know?" This was rather a difficult question to answer so I sat looking at her without saying anything. "You know about men and women having babies and all that, don't you?" she said with an obvious effort.

I said "Yes," and blushed.

"Well, that's a good start anyway," she said. "Now then——" she stopped short and blushed herself, and then giggled nervously. "Oh, my God, I don't know how the hell to begin and that's a fact, well——" she pulled herself together. "Take the plunge, that's always been my motto, so here goes." She crushed out her cigarette and sat up and spoke very fast. "Now listen, Julian, it's a strange world, and it's not a bit of good pretending it isn't. You're only a kid and you ought to have a nice home and go to a nice school and learn history and geography and what not and get to know

all about everything gradually, so it wouldn't be a shock to you, but as it happens you haven't got a nice home, you haven't got a home at all, you're alone except for me and Christ knows I'm no Fairy Godmother, but I've got to tell you everything I can so that you don't go and get upset by things and led away through not realising what it's all about. To begin with, dear, you're a bastard, which sounds awful but isn't so bad really, it only means that your mother wasn't married to your father, they just had an affair and that was that, no obligations on either side and then you were born and your mother died and nobody knew who your father was anyhow, except by rumour, and what Nadia Kolenska who was your mother's friend, wrote to your Aunt Christina. You were brought up on the money that your mother's jewels fetched when your Aunt Christina sold them, and now she's dead too and here you are, alone in Paris with your Aunt Tittie who's not a 'good' woman by any manner of means, but she's all you've got so you'd better make the best of her." Here she leant back and the cushion fell over the end of the sofa on to the floor, so I picked it up and put it behind her head and sat down again.

"When I say I'm not a good woman," she went on, "I mean I'm not what your Aunt Christina would call good. I take life as I find it and get as much as I can out of it. I always have been like that, it's me all over and I can't help it, tho' many's the row I've had with Christina because she never would see that what was good for her, wasn't necessarily good for me. I'm more

like your mother I think really, only not quite so reckless.

"Now if you're going to live with me here, there's a lot of goings on you'll have to open your eyes to wide and then shut 'em tight and not worry, and you mustn't be upset by Mattie's swearing, her flow of language is something fierce when she gets going, but she's a really good friend and you'll like her. As far as the Café Bardac goes you'll have to look out and not be surprised by anything; it's none too refined there after one in the morning. People of all sorts and sizes come and drink at the bar, and sometimes there's a fight and you'll get a good laugh every now and again to see the way those old tarts shriek and yell and carry on. You know what tarts are, don't you?"

I said I wasn't sure, but I thought I did.

"Well," she continued, "they're women who have affairs with men professionally, if you know what I mean. They take 'em home and cuddle up with 'em and the men pay them for it, though when you've had a look at some of them you'll wonder how the hell they get as much as fourpence. But they're quite decent sorts, most of them. Then there are young men who dance around and get paid by the women, they're called 'macros' and aren't much use to anyone except that they dance well and keep the rich old American ladies happy. Then there are lots of boys and young men who make up their faces like women, they're tarts too, only male ones as you might say. Heaps of men like cuddling up with them much better than women, though I should think per-

sonally it must feel rather silly, but after all that's their look-out and no business of mine. They're awfully funny sometimes, you'd die laughing to see them have a row. They scream and slap one another. There's one at the Bardac called Birdie, always in trouble, that one, but he's awfully sweet so long as he doesn't get drunk. If any of the old men ever come up and ask you to drink or go out with them don't you do it, and if they catch hold of you and start getting familiar just wriggle away politely and come and tell me. I'll let 'em have it all right. It's a queer world and no mistake, and you'd much better get to know all you can about it as soon as maybe and then you can stand on your own feet and not give a damn for anyone."

She finished up with rather a rush and then looked at me anxiously. I felt slightly bewildered but I said I'd try to remember all she'd told me and not be surprised at anything whatever happened; then we talked about other things. She asked me to tell her all the details of Aunt Christina's death which I did and she sighed and shook her head sadly and looked for a moment as if she were going to cry, but fortunately just then there was a loud banging on the door and Mattie Gibbons came in. She was shorter and plumper than Aunt Tittie and very dark, she had a grey dress with grey laced-up boots which showed when she sat down, and a bright green blouse with a small diamond watch pinned on it; her hat was grey felt with a blue bird on it. She was very nice to me and shook hands politely and said she didn't know

I was going to be such a big boy. She had a deep husky voice, and I liked her at once.

Aunt Tittie said they wanted to talk privately for a while and would I like to go out for a walk. I said I would, and after she'd warned me about looking to the left first when crossing the road, and told me to mark well the number of the house and street so that I wouldn't get lost, she kissed me and waved me out of the door. I felt my way carefully down the dark stairs and when I got to the front door it wouldn't open. After I'd struggled with it for a long time, a woman put her head out of a door and screamed something at me and then there was a click and the door opened of its own accord. The street was very narrow and filled with traffic. I walked down it slowly looking into all the shop windows; pastry-cooks with the most beautiful-looking cakes I'd ever seen; several artists' shops with easels and paints and boxes of coloured pastels, and wooden jointed figures in strange positions; and a toy shop with hundreds of cheap toys jumbled up in cardboard boxes. There were also grocers and greengrocers and one big shop filled with old furniture and china. This was on the corner and half of it faced the river. I crossed over carefully and walked along the other side past all the little boxes on the parapet filled with books and coloured prints and thousands of back numbers of magazines, very tattered and dusty and tied together in bundles with string.

There were lots of people fingering the books and hurrying along the pavement, nearly all the men had

long beards and some of them went into round iron places covered with advertisements on the outside, and then came out again doing up their trousers. I was very puzzled by this so I peeped into one of them and saw what it was. After that it amused me a lot, looking at the different kinds of feet standing round underneath.

I crossed over a bridge and leant on the stone rail, the water was very green and there were several steamers puffing up and down, occasionally a larger one would come along and its funnel would bend in half as it went under the bridge. The river divided a little way further up, leaving an island in the middle with houses on it coming out almost into a point, and there were trees everywhere all along the edges. Everything looked much clearer and cleaner than London and the shadows of the houses stretched right across the road, sharp and definite.

I felt excited and adventurous and went across to the other side and walked for a long way under the trees; every now and then a noisy yellow tram came along. The lines were more like railway lines than tram lines, and grass was growing between them. By the time I got back to the house the sun was setting and all the windows along the quay looked as though they were on fire.

That evening Mattie came round at about nine o'clock and we all three of us went and had dinner at a café. Our table was right on the pavement and there was a little red-shaded lamp on it. Mattie and Aunt Tittie were very gay and talked very fast in French to the people

that they knew and in English to each other and to me. Aunt Tittie told me what lots of things were in French and said I'd better learn to speak it as quickly as I could as it was very useful. They had had a long talk about me being a "dandy" in their turn and Mattie was pleased with the idea; they said they'd take me that night to the Café Bardac with them and interview Monsieur Claude right away.

After dinner we walked along the boulevard to another café where we had coffee in glasses and they had brandy as well, then we went home and Aunt Tittie made me lie down for an hour while she dressed. She said that as I was going to be up late I'd better get as much rest as possible. At about half-past eleven Mattie called for us, she and Aunt Tittie were both in sparkling evening dresses and cloaks and then we all got into a cab and drove a long way through brightly lighted streets. In the cab Aunt Tittie gave me a latch-key and some money and made me repeat the address over and over again, and said that I should always have to come home by myself, even when I was actually acting in the turn with them, because they generally had to stay on and talk to people sometimes nearly all night. She told me how much the cab would cost and then very slowly and clearly what I was to say to the driver. When I repeated it she and Mattie both laughed and said I spoke French like a native. Mattie said she wondered if it was all right to let me wander about Paris alone at night, and Aunt Tittie said I was very sensible for my age and that it was much

better for me to get used to managing for myself and learn independence.

When we arrived at the Café Bardac nobody was there but a lot of waiters and a man behind the bar. We all went upstairs and sat in a small dressing-room which Mattie and Aunt Tittie shared. Their dresses were hanging up on pegs and there were two chairs, two mirrors on a shelf, and a very small wash-basin in the corner with a jug without a handle standing on the floor by the side of it.

Mattie took a bottle out of the cupboard and they both had a drink. Presently Aunt Tittie went downstairs to see Monsieur Claude and left me to talk to Mattie.

Mattie asked me if I didn't feel strange and I said "yes" but that I was enjoying it. She said, "It's a bloody awful life this really, you know, but it has its funny moments. This café's not so bad as some I've been in. I was dancing with a troupe in Antwerp once and they made us dress in a lavatory on the third floor, and the smell was enough to knock you down I give you my word; this is a little peep at Paradise compared to that and no error!"

Then she took out the bottle again and had another swig and said would I like a taste. I said "yes" and she said "My God, here I go corrupting you already," but she let me have a sip and laughed when I made a face. "It's raw gin, ducks, and don't let anybody ever tell you it's water, but it does make you feel fine, all ready to go out and fight someone, and believe me or believe me not you need that feeling in this Pavilion d'Amour!"

Aunt Tittie came back, looking very pleased and said Monsieur Claude wanted to see me, so down we went to the next floor into a little room with a desk in it and a lot of photographs of naked women stuck on the walls. Monsieur Claude was fat and excitable; he kissed me on both cheeks and then held me by the shoulders and pushed me away from him and looked at me carefully, talking all the time very quickly in French. Then he whispered a lot to Aunt Tittie, gave her a smacking kiss on the lips and ushered us out into the passage. Just as I went through the door, he fumbled in his pocket and gave me three francs. Aunt Tittie was frightfully pleased and said didn't I think he was a dear. "Kind as can be, you know, of course he gets a bit excited now and again but he's never downright nasty except when he's had a couple, which isn't often, thank God."

We went upstairs to the dressing-room again and told Mattie all about it. I was to get ten francs a week to begin with and fifteen later on if I was good. Mattie said the mean old bastard might have come across with a bit more, but Aunt Tittie reminded her that after all he did have to think of his business. We all three went downstairs after a little while. Aunt Tittie introduced me to the barman. He spoke English and gave me a high stool to sit on in a corner behind the bar where I could watch all the people. I sat there for ages until my eyes prickled with the smoke. Every now and then Mattie or Aunt Tittie would come and see if I was all right, then they came down dressed as shepherdesses with bare legs and

after they'd had a little port at the bar they did their parasol dance. Nobody seemed to watch it very much, but they all applauded and cheered when it was finished. I watched their turn all through and then felt so tired that I decided to go home, so I went upstairs to the dressing-room to fetch my hat. I knocked and went in thinking Aunt Tittie and Mattie were downstairs, but they weren't—at least Aunt Tittie wasn't. She was in there with Monsieur Claude. She was sitting on his knee with hardly any clothes on at all and he was kissing her. They both had their eyes closed and neither of them saw me, so I closed the door again very quietly and went out without my hat. I got a cab quite easily and he drove me home and when I paid him, had a long conversation with me which I didn't understand, so I bowed and said *bon soir* and he drove away.

I lay in bed for a long while without sleeping. I felt strange, as though none of the things that were happening to me were real. I wondered whether Aunt Tittie liked being kissed by fat Monsieur Claude, and then all the faces of the people I'd seen at the café seemed to go across my eyes very fast until they were all blurred and I fell asleep. I woke up just for a second in the early morning; a cold grey light was showing through the shutters and I heard Aunt Tittie's voice in the next room. Then her bedroom door slammed and I turned over and went to sleep again.

3

When I first appeared with Aunt Titania and Mattie Gibbons at the Café Bardac in Paris, I had a great personal success; all the tarts made a tremendous fuss of me and said I was *tres gentil* and *tres beau gars* and gave me sweet cakes, and Monsieur Claude raised my salary from ten francs to fifteen francs a week, quite soon. When the engagement came to an end Mattie and Aunt Tittie had a row and parted company. I think the row somehow concerned Monsieur Claude and it was terrible while it lasted. Aunt Tittie cried a lot and said Mattie was a dirty double-faced bitch and Mattie just sat there laughing until Aunt Tittie completely lost control and threw a vermouth bottle at her, which missed her and went flying through the open door into my bedroom and broke the looking-glass over my wash-basin. After that Mattie stopped laughing and chased Aunt Tittie round the table, swearing loudly. They were both drunk and I got rather frightened so I ran outside and sat on the stairs with my fingers in my ears. Presently Mattie came rushing out and fell over me; she smacked my face and went on downstairs screaming. I heard her wrestling with the front door and swearing at it, finally she got it open and slammed it behind her so hard that a large bit of plaster fell off the ceiling into a slop pail on the landing. When I went back into the sitting-room Aunt Tittie was lying on the sofa crying; her hair was

down and her nose was bleeding, making stains all down the front of her dress. When I came in she got up and stumbled into her bedroom where I heard her being very sick. I shut my door and locked it and opened the shutters to see what the day looked like. It was raining hard and the gutters were gurgling loudly so I went back to bed and slept.

Soon after this Aunt Tittie and I packed up everything and went to Ostend. We appeared at a Café Concert in a side street which led down to the Plage. Aunt Tittie did three songs and I learnt a speech in French to introduce her. Everybody used to laugh and clap when I came on with my silk hat and cane and white gloves. Aunt Tittie thought it would be a good thing if I wore a monocle, but I couldn't keep it in my eye until we stuck it in with spirit gum, then it was a great success. We stayed there for six weeks and I used to play about on the Plage during the day.

We lived in a cheap hotel kept by a very thin woman called Madame Blücher; she was half German and sometimes made chocolate cakes with whipped cream on them which were delicious. She had a lot of sons and used to show me photographs of them. One was a sailor and he was photographed holding an anchor and sticking his chest out. He had the biggest behind I've ever seen.

When we'd finished our engagement in Ostend we went to Brussels and were out of work for nearly five weeks. We used to go and sit in the waiting-room of an agent's office with lots of other people wanting jobs.

The walls were plastered with posters of celebrated stars very vividly coloured and there was a signed photograph of Sarah Bernhardt looking like a sheep in white lace.

We had to move out of the hotel we were in and go to a still cheaper one. Aunt Tittie got more and more depressed, but one day she met an Austrian officer in some café or other and came home late looking much more cheerful. He was very handsome and took us both to dinner at an open air restaurant one night; he joked with me a lot and pinched my ear which hurt, but I pretended I liked it. After dinner he put me in a cab and told it to go to the hotel, and gave me the money to pay it, but I stopped the driver when we'd got round the corner and paid him a little and walked home; it was further than I thought but I was three francs to the good. About a week after this Aunt Tittie got a contract to go to Antwerp for three weeks. After that we went to Amsterdam and then back again to Brussels, where we stayed for two months and played for some part of the time at the Mercedes Music-hall.

It was strange at first, doing our turn on an actual stage, but I liked it much better. It wasn't really a proper theatre because most of the audience sat at tables, but it had footlights and scenery and a drop curtain.

Aunt Tittie taught me a song which I did dressed as a pierrot while she changed her dress. It was called "Keep Off the Grass" and was out of a musical comedy in England. Nobody seemed to pay very much attention to it but I enjoyed doing it enormously.

After this we got a long contract and travelled all over France playing a week in each place, ending up with Lyons and Nice and Marseilles and then we went over to Algiers where we stayed for three weeks. There was a conjuror on the bill with us who took a great fancy to me. He asked me to have supper with him one night and we sat in a café with lots of Arabs wearing fezzes. I think he was half an Arab himself. Then we went for a drive along by the sea and he said I was "very nice boy" and "very pretty and had naughty eyes." He held my hand for a little and I knew what was coming so I said I felt very sick and started retching. He took me back to the hotel at once. His turn came on after ours and I always used to wait and watch it; he did card tricks and shot pigeons out of a gun and then to finish up with he used to walk down to the front of the stage and say very solemnly, "Mesdames, Messieurs, maintenant je vous monterai un experiment tres, tres difficile, un experience de vie," whereupon he would take off his coat and shirt and stand stripped to the waist in dead silence for a moment, then, with great deliberation, he'd take a sharp pointed dagger from a table, test it and bend it slightly with his long thin fingers, and then proceed, amid a breathless hush from the audience, to carve out his left nipple. It was very realistically done even to a dark stream of blood which ran down over his ribs. Then suddenly, with a quick jerk, he'd throw the dagger away, whip out a handkerchief, and staunch the blood and cry "Voila" and the curtain fell. He had, I think,

a small rubber squeezer filled with red solution concealed in his hand, and then having made up his own nipple with flesh colour, he stuck a false red one over the top of it. It always brought forth thunders of applause.

After Algiers we went on to Tunis which was very much the same except that the weather was warmer. Then we had a week's engagement in Genoa which was a great failure—all the young Italian men made such a noise that we couldn't make ourselves heard, so we worked our way back to Paris by slow degrees, playing in Geneva and Montreux on the way.

We tried to get the same rooms we'd had before but they were occupied, so we went to a small hotel behind the Invalides and stayed for a few weeks until Aunt Tittie fixed up an autumn contract. Then to fill in the time we went and stayed at a farm near Bordeaux with an old friend of Aunt Tittie's, Madame Brinault. She had been a dancer and had married and retired; she was fat and kind and had three grown-up step-daughters and a step-son, who looked after the vines. They were all very vivacious and talked at the top of their voices all through meals. They had a monkey which bit every now and then but could be very affectionate when it liked. We used to fish in the pond for eels and small mud fish, and walk all along through the vines and pinch the grapes to see if they were coming along all right.

We stayed there for six weeks, and it did us a lot of good. Aunt Tittie got quite fat from drinking so much

milk and cream and she let her hair go for the whole time without dyeing it so that it looked very odd, yellow at the ends and brownish-grey at the roots.

We spent most of the next year in Germany playing in Frankfurt, Hamburg, Dresden, Nuremburg, Munich, Hanover, Heidelberg and Berlin, where Aunt Tittie met Arthur Wheeler, an acrobat, and fell violently in love with him. We stayed on there for several months, playing sometimes in suburban halls and sometimes in cafés in Potsdam and Berlin itself. Arthur Wheeler was a thick-set bad-tempered little man and he used to beat Aunt Tittie often, but I don't think she minded. He came with us in the summer to a place called Achensee in the Tyrol and we stayed in a pension hotel and used to go out for picnics on the lake. He taught me to swim and dive. The lake water was ice cold even with the hot sun on it, but I got used to it and often swam seven or eight times a day. Wheeler used to lie on the grass by the side of the water with a towel tied round his middle, and do acrobatics, frequently with such violence that the towel would fall off and Aunt Tittie would laugh until she cried and say: "That's it, Arthur, give the poor Germans a treat!"

Every evening we used to sit outside the pension and have dinner. The tables were set almost in the road and processions of German families would march by, very hot and tired from their climbing. Even the young men had fat stomachs and they all wore shorts, and embroidered braces and small hats.

Every evening at about six o'clock we had beer at an open-air restaurant just by the water. We liked watching the steamer come puffing across the lake and then stop at the pier and land the passengers.

One evening when Wheeler had paid for the beer and we were about to walk back to the pension, he suddenly stood stock still, clutched Aunt Tittie's arm and said: "Jumping Jesus, that's my wife!"

I looked up and saw a thin woman in a brown dress walking down the pier and staring fixedly at us. We all stood where we were until she came up to us. She looked very angry and was biting her lips nervously.

"Arthur," she said, "I want to talk to you." Her voice was grating and hard, and completely determined.

Arthur Wheeler started to bluster a bit: "Now look here, Amy——" he began, but she cut him short by taking his arm and leading him to the other end of the garden where they sat down at a table. I looked at Aunt Tittie who was very white, she hadn't said a word.

"Shall we go back to the pension?" I said. She shook her head. "No, we'll stay here," so we sat down again at the table we'd just got up from, and waited. The steamer gave a sudden hoot of its siren which made me jump, then it went churning away up the lake. It was twilight and the mountains looked jagged against the sky as though they had been cut out of black paper. On the other side of the lake, lights were already twinkling in the villages. The steamer hooted again a good way off and a flock of birds flew chattering out of the big

trees behind the restaurant. I looked at Aunt Tittie. She was staring straight in front of her and her face was set and still except for two little pulses twitching at her temples.

Presently Mrs. Wheeler came over to us. Aunt Tittie stood up.

"Arthur's leaving with me on the first boat to-morrow morning," said Mrs. Wheeler. "He's going back to your hotel now to pack his things. I've engaged a room here for us for to-night."

"Oh," said Aunt Tittie. "That will be nice, won't it?"

"If you haven't any money," went on Mrs. Wheeler, "I'm sure Arthur'll give you enough to get you back to wherever you come from."

Aunt Tittle gave a little gasp. "Thank you for nothing," she said, her voice sounded high and strained. "I don't want Arthur's money and you know it."

"You're a low woman," said Mrs. Wheeler. "I don't wish to exchange words with you."

"I'm not so low as to live on a man's earnings for fifteen years and not give him anything in return."

"Your sort couldn't hold a man fifteen years," said Mrs. Wheeler.

"I wouldn't want to hold anyone who didn't want to stay," said Aunt Tittie. "He loves me more than he does you, otherwise he wouldn't be here, would he? And you can put that in your pipe and smoke it."

Mrs. Wheeler trembled. "You're nothing but a low class prostitute," she said hoarsely, whereupon Aunt

Tittie gave her a ringing slap on the face which knocked her hat on one side and left a pink stain on her cheek.

Arthur came running up looking very frightened. "Leave off you two, for Christ's sake," he said. "Everyone's looking at you."

"I'm sorry I hit her," said Aunt Tittie. "I never did know when to control myself. Come on home, Arthur, and pack your bag." She turned and walked away. Arthur followed her rather uncertainly and I came last. I looked back at Mrs. Wheeler who was standing quite still where we'd left her with her hat still on one side. I know she was crying because the lamp by the gate showed wet streaks on her face.

We all walked back to the pension in silence. When we got there I stayed outside and let them go in by themselves. I went and sat on the wall by the lake. The water was completely still and lay along the shore like a glass sheet. Presently Arthur Wheeler came out of the house carrying his suit-case, he waved to me half-heartedly and then walked away quickly.

When I went back into the pension, Aunt Tittie was sitting at the window with her head buried in her arms, sobbing. She didn't take any notice of me so I sat on the bed and said nothing. Presently she pulled herself together and got up and looked in the glass. "I'm a pretty sight and no mistake," she said huskily, and tried to smile, then she put on her hat and went out. I watched her from the window wandering along in the opposite

direction from the village. I waited up until she came back at about half-past ten. She seemed glad I was there and made a great effort to be cheerful. She took off her hat and fluffed out her hair and we made tea on the gas-ring and ate biscuits with it.

She talked a lot but didn't mention Arthur once. She said she'd been thinking things out and had decided to go to Vienna; she said she knew an agent there called Max Steiner and that we'd probably get work right away. She said Vienna was a lovely place and she was longing to see it again, she'd been there once before with Mattie several years ago. When I said good night she suddenly hugged me very tight and said: "Well, dear, we're on our ownsome again now, so let's enjoy it!"

After this, poor Aunt Tittie was terribly dispirited and unhappy for weeks. We went to Vienna and found that Max Steiner was away so we trudged around to several other agents until we had no more money left. Then I got a job in the Prater Amusement Park at a Houp-la Booth. I had to jerk the hoops on to a stick after the people had thrown them and then sling them back to the proprietor who was a brass-throated fat little man but quite kind. I made enough money that way to get us food, and Aunt Tittie managed to pay for our rooms in a very dirty little hotel, by picking up men every once in a while; it wasn't really too easy for her because there were so many young and attractive professionals who knew the best cafés and resented intrusion on their beats. I used to be dreadfully tired when I got home every night

and I got awful blisters on my feet from standing about all day.

In October, Aunt Tittie met a very rich old man who took her to Budapest. When she'd been gone about a week she telegraphed me some money to come at once so I gave a day's notice to the Houpla Booth and went. Aunt Tittie met me at the station in a smart motor-car; she was well-dressed and looked much happier. She said she had a small flat overlooking the river and that if only her old man could live for a little longer we'd be on velvet, but that he was very, very old indeed, and she was afraid he wouldn't keep through the winter. We laughed a lot and were delighted to be together again. Her flat really was quite nice and I slept in a little servant's room at the back. There was a Hungarian cook who came in by the day and we did the housework ourselves. The old man didn't trouble us much, he only came to dinner two or three times a week and then didn't stay very late. I used to go out when he came and walk in the town, which was beautiful, and sit about in cafés drinking coffee and listening to the Tziganes.

After we'd been there a few weeks Aunt Tittie met an old friend of hers from Paris in the Hungaria Hotel. He was a Frenchman, and was running a small café on the other side of the river. He came to tea at the flat two days later and we did our turn for him and he said he would engage us. Aunt Tittie was really looking very well just then and had a lot of nice clothes. We started work the following Monday and stayed there the whole

winter, we changed our songs every fortnight, and saved quite a lot of money.

In April, Aunt Tittie's old man had to go and do a cure at Baden-Baden. He decided to go quite suddenly and wrote a letter to her saying good-bye and enclosing enough money to pay the last month's rent and a bit over besides. We were both very relieved really and never saw him again. A year later we read in the paper that he had died.

We left Budapest in May and went back to Vienna where we stayed a few days, then went to Prague where we played in an open-air café for six weeks. Then we came back to Paris with enough money to keep us for the summer at least, if we lived cheaply.

That autumn we started again on our travels, we got return engagements in some of the towns we had played before. I was now fourteen and getting very tall. For the next two years our lives went along pretty evenly. We met Arthur Wheeler once in Nice on the Promenade des Anglais; he looked spruce and well and was wearing a straw hat, which he lifted politely, but Aunt Tittie cut him dead, and as we were leaving the next day we didn't see him again. In the summer of 1911 we were back in Paris. Aunt Tittie wasn't well and complained of pains inside. We didn't work for a few weeks and they went away.

In the January following, I had my seventeenth birthday. It came on a Sunday and we were travelling to Spain where we'd neither of us been before. We got

out at Bayonne and bought a bottle of champagne and had a celebration all to ourselves in the compartment. We finished the bottle between us and I got drunk for the first time in my life and went shouting up and down the corridor; Aunt Tittie was too weak with laughter to stop me.

We played in a Café Chantant in San Sebastian; it had only just opened and was new and gaudy and smelt of paint. The proprietor was a fat Belgian Jew who wore an enormous diamond and sapphire ring on his little finger. We had been recommended to him by Demaire, our agent in Paris, as a novelty. He didn't seem to think we were very novel and was rude to Aunt Tittie when she asked for the band to play more quietly, but it mattered little as hardly anybody came to the café anyhow and we were paid our salary and dismissed after the first week. We played in several different places in Spain but without much success. The Spaniards were polite and applauded our turn perfunctorily and that was all; there was no enthusiasm, and when Aunt Tittie went from table to table singing "How would you like a little Rose like Me?" they generally sat quite silently and looked at her, and very seldom even held out their hand for the paper roses, so poor Aunt Tittie had to put them down on the table and go on to the next one. It was very discouraging for her; of course, she was beginning to look rather old, and her smile lacked the gaiety it used to have.

When we got to Barcelona we played in a very dirty

music-hall which was a bit better because the floor of the auditorium was uncarpeted wood and the people stamped their feet instead of clapping, which made a tremendous noise and made everything we did seem like a triumphant success. We went to a big bull fight one afternoon which upset us both horribly; Aunt Tittie cried all the way back to the hotel, thinking about the horses, and how they trotted into the ring so amicably with a bandage over one eye to prevent them from seeing the bull coming. Some of them screamed dreadfully when they were gored and the memory of it haunted us for days.

We sat outside a café on the way home and had Ochata which is an iced sweet drink made of nuts, and looks like very thick milk. Aunt Tittie kept on bursting into tears and then laughing at herself hysterically, altogether she was in such a state that she had to have some brandy and lie down before the show. Two nights after that when we had finished our turn and I was waiting outside the dressing-room under the stage, while Aunt Tittie dressed, there was suddenly a terrific crash up above and a loud scream and the orchestra stopped dead. I rushed up on to the stage to see what had happened. Everyone was running about and yelling. One of the big lime-light lamps had exploded and fallen down and set fire to the curtains, which were blazing.

A conjuror who had been doing his turn when the thing fell came rushing past me and knocked me against the wall; his wife who was his assistant, was shut up in

his magic cabinet in the middle of the stage and was hammering on the inside of it to be let out. The stage manager ran towards it to open it, but before he could reach it a whole length of blazing curtain fell right across it.

I ran quickly downstairs to fetch Aunt Tittie and met her coming up in her dressing-gown with grease all over her face. We heard the conjuror's wife shrieking horribly as the cabinet started to burn, but there was no chance of rescuing her because by this time the whole stage was blazing. We tried to beat our way through the thick smoke to the stage-door. Aunt Tittie was choking, and a stage-hand, mad with fright knocked her down and stumbled right over her; one of his boots cut her face. I helped her up and we finally got out into the alley. There was a terrific crash behind us as part of the roof fell in. Aunt Tittie gave a little gasp and collapsed, so I grabbed her under the arms and dragged her along the alley with her heels scraping over the cobblestones. There were hundreds of people running about screaming and I was terrified that we'd be thrown down and trampled to death. When I got Aunt Tittie out of the alley into the street I suddenly thought of the conjuror's wife trapped inside that cabinet, and I laid Aunt Tittie on the ground and was violently sick in the gutter.

When I'd finished, I sat down on the kerb by her side. Then I noticed that her face was bleeding, so I dabbed it with my handkerchief and she opened her eyes. The fire engines had arrived by this time. I could hear them in the

next street. A man came up and we both helped Aunt Tittie to her feet; she stood swaying for a moment with our arms supporting her and then gave a scream and clutched her side and fainted again. I didn't know what to do, the man couldn't speak French or English, and I only knew a few words of Spanish. He helped me carry her along to the street corner and I signed to him to wait with her while I got a taxi. I ran very fast but couldn't see one anywhere. Suddenly I saw a motor ambulance coming out of a side street, I stopped it and directed it back to where I'd left Aunt Tittie. The two ambulance men lifted her into it and I said good-bye to the strange man and thanked him very much, and he raised his bowler hat and bowed and we drove away to the hospital leaving him standing there.

When we arrived at the hospital they took Aunt Tittie into the emergency ward and I sat by her for ages before anyone came near us. She came to after a little and started to cry; she said she had a terrible pain in her stomach at the side! Her voice sounded very weak and husky. There were lots of other people lying on beds and groaning. One man's face was almost black and all the hair on the top of his head was burnt away leaving mottled red patches. He kept on giving little squeaks like a rabbit, and clutching at the sheet with his hands which were dreadfully burned.

Presently two Sisters of Mercy came in and went round to all the beds and tried to make people a little more comfortable. Finally two doctors came with several

nurses; and they went from bed to bed and talked a lot, in low voices. When they got to us I stood up and explained in French about Aunt Tittie's pain. Fortunately one of them understood all right and felt her stomach with his fingers, then he sent one of the nurses away and she came back in a few minutes with a stretcher on wheels. We all got Aunt Tittie on to it and I walked behind it with the doctor through miles of passages.

Eventually we got to a very quiet ward with only a few beds occupied. A Sister of Mercy was sitting reading at a table with a shaded lamp on it. She got up when we came in. 'Then the doctor took me downstairs to the waiting-room and said that he was afraid Aunt Tittie had a very bad appendix but that he was going to give her a thorough examination and make sure and that I'd better go home and come back in the morning. I said I'd rather stay in case Aunt Tittie wanted me, so he said "very well" and left me. I lay on a bench all night and slept part of the time. In the early morning two cleaners came in and clattered about with pails. I got up and found my way to the main entrance and finally found a nurse who spoke a little French. She said it was too early to find out anything and that I'd better have some coffee and come back, so I went out into the street and found a café that was just opening and drank some coffee and ate a roll. When I got back I met the doctor coming down the steps, he took me into an office and a Sister of Mercy took down particulars about Aunt Titania which I gave her in French, and the doctor translated into Spanish.

When that was done he told me that the only chance of saving Aunt Tittie's life was to operate immediately; I asked if I could see her and he said no, that she was almost unconscious and that if I was agreeable he would operate right away. I said he'd better do what he thought best and that I'd wait, so I went back to the waiting-room. A lot of people had come in, several were relatives of people who had been in the fire, most of them moaned and wailed and made a great noise. About three hours later a nurse came and called out my name. I stood up, and she took me into the office again. After a minute or two the doctor came in looking very serious. He told me that there was scarcely any hope of Aunt Tittie living, as when they operated they discovered that the appendix had burst. He said she hadn't come to yet from the anæsthetic, but that I could see her when she did. I asked when that would be and he said he couldn't tell for certain, but that I'd better wait. They let me stay in the office which was nicer than the waiting room, and the Sister of Mercy gave me some dry biscuits out of a tin on her desk. She had a round face, and glasses, and peered at me through them sympathetically. Presently a nurse appeared and signed to me to follow her. We went several floors in a lift. There was a wheel stretcher in it with a man lying on it and an orderly standing by the side. The man didn't move at all and his head was covered with bandages.

This time Aunt Tittie was in a private room which was very dim and there was a screen round the head of the

bed and another near the door. When I went in I could hardly see for a minute; the nurse drew up a chair and I sat down by the bed. Aunt Tittie was lying quite still with her eyes closed. Her face was dead white and she had a nightdress on of thick flannel which was buttoned up to the chin. She looked terribly, terribly tired and every now and then her mouth gave a little twitch. I felt a longing to put my arms round her and hold her tight and tell her how much I loved her, but when I thought about that I wanted to cry, so I looked away for a moment and tried to control myself. Presently she opened her eyes and moved her head to one side; she saw me and said "Hello, dearie," in a whisper. Then she frowned and closed her eyes again, I took her hand which was outside the coverlet, and held it. It felt dry and hot. After a little while she moved again and tried to speak, her hand clutched mine very hard and then relaxed. I put my head down close to hers and she said: "Take care of yourself." I started crying then, hopelessly, but I was careful not to make any noise and her eyes were still shut so she couldn't see. Suddenly she gave a little moan and the nurse came out from behind the screen and motioned me to go out of the room. I disengaged my hand from Aunt Tittie's very gently; she didn't seem to notice, and I went out into the passage. There was a window at the end and I stood and looked out across the hospital grounds to the town. It was a very windy day and there was a flagstaff upon the hill with the flag standing straight out from it looking as though it were made of wood.

Every now and then it fluttered and subsided for a moment and then blew out straight again.

I waited about all day in the hospital, but they wouldn't let me in to see Aunt Tittie again, because they said she was unconscious, and in the evening at about seven o'clock she died. I went back to the hotel and lay on my bed, trying to be sensible and think things out, but I wasn't very successful and finally gave way and cried for a long time until I dropped off to sleep. When I woke up it was about eleven o'clock and I felt better, but I couldn't sleep any more so I went out and wandered about the town. I walked right down to the harbour and watched the ships. There was a big liner, standing a little way out, all the decks were brilliantly lighted and I could hear music faintly. I suddenly realised that I hadn't had anything to eat all day, so I went into a restaurant which was filled with sailors, and had a plate of stew and some coffee; everything was very greasy and I couldn't eat much of it.

The next day I went through all Aunt Tittie's things and discovered that she had twenty sovereigns locked in her jewel-case, also a brooch with diamonds and two rings, one with very small rose diamonds, and the other plain gold. I myself had fourteen pounds saved, mostly in francs. I went back to the hospital and interviewed the doctor about the operation and funeral expenses. He was very kind, and when I told him how much I had, said that he wouldn't charge for the operation. In spite of this, however, I had to pay out a good deal and when the

whole business was over I had about seventeen pounds left. Aunt Tittie was buried two days later. An English clergyman appeared and did it all. He was officious, and kept on asking me questions about her. I bought a bunch of flowers and put them on the grave, then I went back and packed up everything and bought a ticket for Paris.

The Paris train was crowded, and I sat in the corridor all night and thought about Aunt Tittie, until my heart nearly burst with loneliness and I pressed my head against the window and longed to be dead, too.

What Mad Pursuit?

I

EVAN LORRIMER'S celebrity value was unquestionably high. In the course of twenty years he had written no less than eleven novels; a volume of war poems, tinged with whimsical bitterness; one play which had been much praised by the London critics and run nearly two months; a critical survey of the life and times of Madame de Staël entitled *The Life and Times of Madame de Staël;* sundry essays and short stories for the more literary weeklies, and an autobiography. The autobiography had been on the whole the least successful of his works, but he in no way regretted having written it. For years he had been aware that incidents, journeys, and personal experiences had been accumulating in his mind until it had come to a point when he could no longer feel free to pursue his historical researches. He felt himself to be congested, or, to put it more crudely, constipated, and that unless he could get rid of this agglomeration of trivia, his real genius, which was writing graphically of the past in terms of the present, would atrophy. The autobiography therefore, was a sort of cathartic and as such achieved its object. Hardly had

the corrected and revised manuscript been delivered to the publishers before he was at work again, drafting out with renewed energy and clarity of thought his great novel of the Restoration, *A London Lady*. There was no doubt in his mind that if *My Steps Have Faltered*, which was the title of the autobiography, had not been written when it was, *A London Lady* would never have been written at all. The success of *A London Lady* transcended by far everything else he had ever written. It went into several editions within the first few weeks of its publication. It was elected, without one dissentient vote, as the Book Society's choice for the month of February. The most important moving picture company in Hollywood acquired the film rights of it at an even higher price than they had paid for *The Life of Saint Paul*, which had been awarded the Pulitzer Prize for the year before, and in addition to all this, its sales in America surpassed those of England a hundredfold before it had been out six weeks. It was on the suggestion of Evan's New York publisher, Neuman Bloch, that he had agreed to do a short lecture tour in the States. He had been naturally apprehensive of the idea at first, but after a certain amount of coaxing, and tempted by the prospect of visiting America for the first time in such singularly advantageous circumstances—full expenses there and back, a tour of only eight weeks visiting the principal towns, and a guaranteed fee for each lecture that appeared to be little short of fantastic—he gathered his courage together, made exhaustive notes on the subjects on which

he intended to speak, and set sail in the *Queen Mary*.

Now it would be foolish to deny that Evan Lorrimer enjoyed publicity. Everyone enjoys publicity to a certain degree. It is always pleasant to feel that your name is of sufficient interest to the world to merit a prominent position in the daily newspapers. For many years past, Evan had been privately gratified to read such phrases as "Of course Evan Lorrimer was there, suave and well-groomed as usual," or "That inveterate first-nighter, Evan Lorrimer, arrived a few minutes before the curtain rose and was seen chatting laughingly to Lady Millicent Cawthorne in the foyer," or "Evan Lorrimer whose new novel, *A London Lady*, has caused such a sensation, was the guest of honour at the Pen and Pencil Club on Sunday evening." Such allusions, guileless and dignified, are immensely agreeable. Unimportant perhaps in their essence, but in their implication very important indeed. Just as millions of little coral animals in so many years construct a barrier reef against the sea, so can these small accolades, over a period of time, build, if not quite a barrier reef, at least a fortification against the waves of oblivion. Evan felt this very strongly. His reviews he read as a matter of course, regarding them rightly as part of the business. Naturally he was pleased when they were good and pained when they were bad, but the gossip columns were different. They were both unprejudiced and uncritical; they contented themselves with the simple statement that he was here or there with so-and-so, or accompanied by such-and-such, and by their

repetitious banality did more to consolidate his reputation than all the carefully phrased opinions of the literati put together. But Evan, well used as he was to being photographed and interviewed and occasionally signing a few autograph-books, was certainly unprepared for the violence of his reception in New York. From the moment the ship paused at Quarantine turmoil engulfed him. He was belaboured with questions by over a dozen reporters at the same time, photographed waving to mythical friends by no less than fifteen cameras simultaneously, hurried on to the dock where he was met by Neuman Bloch, Mrs. Bloch, the firm's publicity agent, several more reporters and, most surprisingly, a man who had been at school with him and whom he hadn't clapped eyes on for twenty-six years. In the flurry of Customs examination, interviews, and the effort to sustain a reasonably intelligent flow of conversation with the Blochs, he was completely unable to recall the man's name; however it didn't matter, for after wringing his hand warmly, and standing by his side in silence for a few minutes, he disappeared into the crowd and Evan never saw him again.

Evan Lorrimer at the age of forty-three was, both in appearance and behaviour, a model of what an eminent Englishman of letters should be. He was five-foot-ten, his figure was spare but well-proportioned, he had slim, expressive hands, dark hair greying slightly at the temples, deep-set grey eyes, a small, neat moustache and an urbane smile. Perhaps his greatest asset was his voice

which was rich in tone and, at times, almost caressing, particularly when, with his slyly humorous gift of phrase, he was describing somebody a trifle maliciously. Lady Cynthia Cawthorne who, in Lowndes Square had achieved the nearest approach to a London salon since Lady Blessington, was wont to say, with her loud infectious laugh, that had she only been younger she'd have married Evan Lorrimer out of hand if only to hear him repeat over and over again his famous description of being taken, at the age of fifteen, to the Musèe Grevin by Marcel Proust.

Evan, like so many people who have attained fame and fortune by their own unaided efforts, was a firm self-disciplinarian. He apportioned his time with meticulous care: so many hours for writing, so many for reading. He ate and drank in moderation and indulged in only enough exercise to keep himself fit. He contrived, although naturally of a highly-strung, nervous temperament, to maintain an agreeable poise both physically and mentally and to derive a great deal of enjoyment from life, admittedly without often scaling the heights of rapture, but also without plumbing the depths of despair. This self-adjustment, this admirable balance, was dependent upon one absolute necessity and that necessity was sleep. Eight solid hours per night minimum, with a possible snooze during the day, was his deadline. Without that he was lost, his whole organism disintegrated. He became jumpy and irascible, unable to concentrate. In fact on one occasion, owing to an emotional upheaval when the

pangs of not sufficiently requited love gnawed at his vitals for nearly four months, he became actively ill and had to retire to a nursing home. Realising this one weakness, this Achilles heel, he arranged his life accordingly.

At home, in his small house in Chesham Place, his two servants had been trained to a mouse-like efficiency. Until he was called in the morning the house was wrapped in the silence of death. The knocker had been taken off the front door, and both bells, front and back, muffled down to the merest tinkle; the telephone by his bed was switched off nightly and rang in the basement, and even there, after a series of dogged experiments by Albert his valet, it had been reduced to nothing more than a purr. Naturally, taking all this into consideration, the first few nights in New York were a torture to him. He had, of course, been warned that the sharpness of the climate and the champagne quality of the air would enable him to do with less sleep than he was accustomed to in the older, more stagnant atmosphere of England, and although he discovered this to be true to a certain extent, he was unable to repress a slight feeling of panic. If only, he reflected, he could get away into the country for two or three days, to relax, to give himself time to adjust himself, he might come to view the so much swifter tempo of American life with more equanimity.

It was on the fourth day after his arrival, towards the end of a strenuously literary cocktail party given in his honour by the Neuman Blochs that he met Louise

Steinhauser. He was introduced to her by his hostess and immediately taken out on to the terrace to look at the view. This had already happened to him five times, and although he had been deeply impressed by the view the first two times, it was now beginning to pall a little; however Louise was adamant. "Look at it," she said in a husky, rather intense voice. "Isn't it horrible?"

Evan gave a slight start of surprise. Louise went on: "Every time I look at New York from a height like this, I positively shudder. All those millions of people cooped up in those vast buildings give me such a feeling of claustrophobia that I think I'm going mad. If I didn't live out in the country most of the time I really should go mad. My husband, poor darling, comes in every day of course, and we have an apartment at the Pierre—you can just see it from here behind that tower that looks like a pencil with india-rubber on top—but really I hardly ever use it unless I happen to come in for a late party or an opening night or something, and even then I often drive down home afterwards, however late it is."

"How far away is your home in the country?" enquired Evan.

"About an hour in the automobile; at night of course, it's much quicker and I can't begin to tell you how lovely it is to arrive at about two in the morning and smell the sea—my house is right on the sea—and just go to sleep in that wonderful silence—you'd think you were miles away from anywhere, and yet it's actually only a little way from New York. There are no houses near us,

we're completely isolated—— You really must come down for a week-end, except that I warn you there isn't a thing to do except lie about and relax. Bonwit, that's my husband, plays golf occasionally or a little tennis, but I don't play anything. I find at my age—I shall be forty-four next month, imagine!"—she laughed disarmingly, "I never try to hide my age, it's so silly, after all what *does* it matter. Anyhow, as I was saying, at my age I find that all I want are my comforts, nice books, a few real friends, not just acquaintances, and good food. I'm afraid that's all I can offer you, peace and good food, but if you would like to slip away from all this," she indicated the remainder of the cocktail party milling about inside with a wave of her hand, "and really lead the simple life for a couple of days, you don't even have to bring dinner-clothes if you don't want to. Please come, both Bonwit and I would be absolutely enchanted."

Evan had been looking at her carefully while she was talking, carefully and critically. Being a writer, he was naturally observant, his mind was trained to perceive small indicative details. Being a celebrity he was also cautious. He noted Louise's clothes first; they were obviously expensive, the ruby and diamond clip in her small cloche hat could only have come from Cartier. Her pearls might or might not be real, but the clasp most certainly was. In addition to these external advantages he liked her. She was vivacious, humorous and friendly. She also seemed to have a sensible appreciation of the values of life.

"You're most kind," he said. "There's nothing I should like better."

"Now isn't that lovely," cried Louise. "How long are you going to be here?"

"Alas, only until next Wednesday, then I have to lecture in Chicago."

"I suppose you're booked up for this next week-end?"

Evan shook his head. He had been tentatively invited to the Neuman Blochs' house at Ossining, but he hadn't definitely accepted. "I was supposed to go to the Blochs'," he said, "but I can get out of it."

"Then that's settled," said Louise gaily. "I'm coming in on Saturday to go to *Starlight*, that's a musical comedy that Lester Gaige is in. He's one of my greatest friends, you'll adore him. Why don't you dine with me and come too, and we'll all three drive down afterwards. He's the only person I've invited for this week-end. I daren't have a lot of people when he comes because he insists on being quiet. He says he gives out so much at every performance during the week that he's damned if he'll give a social performance on Sundays. He really is divine, and he certainly won't bother you because he does nothing but sleep."

As they rejoined the cocktail party, Evan felt that the much-vaunted American hospitality was a very genuine and touching trait.

2

Lester Gaige was certainly amusing. At first, watching him on the stage, Evan had been unsure as to whether or not he was going to like him; he seemed to be too debonair, almost arrogant in the manner in which he moved through the bewildering intricacies of *Starlight*. True, he danced beautifully, sang, with no voice but compelling charm, and dominated by sheer force of personality every scene he was in; but there was a something about him, a mocking veneer that made you a trifle uneasy as to what you might discover underneath. However, in the car driving down to the country, he was much more human. His clothes were inclined to be eccentric. He had on suede shoes, thin silk socks, very pale grey flannel trousers of exquisite cut, a bois de rose sweater with a turtle neck, a tweed sports jacket of extravagant heartiness and a fur-lined overcoat with an astrakhan collar. In addition he wore a small beret basque and a pair of the largest horn-rimmed glasses Evan had ever seen. The conversation between him and Louise was stimulating if a little local in allusion. They referred to so many people in such a short space of time that Evan became quite confused; but he sat back in the corner of the luxurious Packard and gave himself up to being agreeably soothed and entertained. It was obvious that Louise and Lester had been intimate friends for several years; their talk, generally in a gaily reminiscent

vein, jumped from London to Paris, from Antibes back to New York, from New York to Venice and from Venice to California. "That amazing party of Irene's when Broddie got blind and had that awful scene with Carola." "That terrible night in Salzburg when Nada refused to go home and finally disappeared into the mountains with Sonny Boy for three days." Occasionally Evan, not wishing to appear out of it, ventured a question as to who So-and-so was, and was immediately rewarded by a vivid, if not always entirely kind, description of So-and-so's life, activities and morals. On the whole he enjoyed himself very much. To begin with, they had all three had a Scotch Highball (ridiculous expression) in Lester's dressing-room before they started and then another one at Twenty One where they had had to stop for a moment because Lester had to give some message to Ed Bolingbroke, who had been apparently too drunk to understand it, then, not long after they had crossed the Fifty-ninth Street Bridge, Lester had produced a bottle of Scotch from his overcoat pocket, and they had all had a little extra swig to keep them warm. It was necessary to keep warm for the night was bitterly cold; there had been a blizzard the day before and the snow was several inches thick and freezing over.

When they finally reached the Steinhauser home Evan got out of the car, stretched his cramped legs and gave an exclamation of pleasure. It really was most attractive. A large low white house built on three sides of a square and looking out over Long Island Sound. It was a clear

moonlight night and far away on the Connecticut coast lights twinkled across the water. Behind the house was nothing but snow, and a few bleak winter trees. Above all, there was silence, complete and soul-satisfying silence, broken only by the soft lap of the waves on the shore.

Inside, the house was the acme of comfort, a large fire was blazing away in a wide open fireplace in the main living room; before it was set a table laid for supper. A pleasant, coloured butler in a white coat met them at the front door. Evan sighed a deep sigh of relief. This was even better than he had imagined.

They sat up until very late over the fire talking. The supper had been delicious, a simple but tasty dish of spaghetti, tomatoes and eggs, a well-mixed green salad with cream cheese and Bar le Duc and further Scotch Highballs. Evan had had two since his arrival and although he was far from intoxicated, he felt enjoyably mellow. Lester, who was really a great deal more intelligent than one would expect a musical comedy actor to be, displayed a flattering interest in Evan's work. He had read *A London Lady*, and been thrilled with it, he was also one of the few people who had read and enjoyed *My Steps Have Faltered*. Evan dismissed his praise of this with a deprecatory laugh, but he was pleased none the less. Louise was a good hostess and, more than that, Evan decided, an extremely good sort. She talked with vivacity and her sense of humour was true and keen. She appeared to be one of those rare types, a rich woman who is completely unaffected by her wealth. She was

downright, honest, and withal very attractive. She alluded to her husband frequently, and it was apparent that although they might not quite see eye to eye over certain things, she was deeply attached to him. They had a son at Harvard to whom they were both obviously devoted. Louise showed Evan a photograph of him dressed in the strange robotish armour of an American footballer. He was a husky, fine-looking lad. Lester was highly enthusiastic about him. "That boy is fantastic," he said, "you'd never believe it to look at him, but he paints the most remarkable water-colours! He gave me one when I was playing Boston in *And So What*. It's a seascape, rather Japanesey in quality, almost like a Foujita." Evan looked again at the photograph, slightly puzzled. Really Americans were most surprising. It was difficult to imagine that six feet of brawn and muscle painting demure seascapes, and even more difficult to understand how Lester Gaige playing in *And So What* in Boston could ever have heard of Foujita. Perhaps there was something to be said after all for that American culture that Europeans referred to with such disdain.

It wasn't until nearly four o'clock that Louise suddenly jumped up from the sofa on which she had been lying and cried: "Really this is terrible—I bring you down here to rest and keep you up to all hours talking. We simply *must* go to bed." She led the way through the hall and along a little passage. "I've given you the quietest room in the house," she said over her shoulder, "it's on the ground floor and you'll have to share a bathroom with

Lester. I would have given you a room upstairs with a bath to yourself but it isn't nearly so shut away and you might be disturbed by Bonwit getting up early or the servants or something." She opened the door leading into a charmingly furnished bedroom. "This is Lester's," she said, "you're along here." They passed through a gleaming, well-equipped bathroom, along another little passage and there was Evan's room. It was large, with two beds and decorated in a pale, restful green. In addition to the two beds there was a chaise longue piled with cushions in front of the fire which, although it must have been lit hours ago, was still burning cosily. Evan smiled with pleasure. "What a perfect room," he said gratefully. Louise gave the fire a poke. "I know how English people loathe central heating," she said, "and I've told them to have a fire for you all the time you're here, but if you'll take my advice you'll have the heat on a little bit as well, because the weather's really freezing."

After Louise had said good night and gone up to bed, and Lester and Evan had smoked one more cigarette and exchanged the usual politenesses as to which of them should use the bathroom first, Evan, at last alone, opened the window, and, cold as it was, stood for a moment looking up at the stars and listening to the silence. He sniffed the icy air into his lungs, and with a sigh of utter contentment climbed into bed and was asleep in five minutes.

3

Evan woke at ten-thirty, which was rather early considering how late he had gone to bed. He counted up in his mind, four-thirty to ten-thirty, only six hours, but still it didn't matter, he could easily make up for it that night. He lay there idly looking at the reflection of the sea on the ceiling and contemplating, with a slight sinking of the heart, his lecture on Monday night. It was drawing very near and he was naturally nervous, but still he had certainly been wise to give himself this breathing space immediately before it. He planned to go over his notes sometime during the day. He was aware, of course, that he spoke well and that his subject "History and the Modern Novel" was pretty certain to interest his American audience. He intended to start with the middle ages, the period of his first two novels, then jump to French eighteenth century, bringing in his *Porcelaine Courtesan*, *Madame is Indisposed* and *The Sansculotte*, then to the Directoire and *Madame de Staël*, leaving the Restoration and *A London Lady* to the last. He was determined, in spite of the cautious advice of Neuman Bloch, to deliver a few well-deserved slaps at some of the more successful American writers who so impertinently twisted European history to their own ends. Evan detested slang and the use of present-day idiom in describing the past. Not that he was a believer in the "Odd's Boddikins" "Pish Tushery" school of historical

writing; he himself eschewed that with the greatest contempt, but he did believe in being factually accurate insofar as was possible, and in using pure English. Had not the exquisite literacy of *A London Lady* been one of the principal reasons for its success with the Book Society? And not only the Book Society, with the reviewers of both continents and with the general public. One of Evan's most comforting convictions was that the general public had a good deal more discrimination and taste than it was given credit for, and that all this careless, slipshod, *soi disant* modern style with its vulgarity of phrase and cheap Americanisms would, in a very little while, be consigned to the oblivion it so richly deserved.

At this point in his reflections he broke off to wonder whether or not he should ring for some fruit juice and coffee. He remembered from last night that the only entrance to his room was through Lester's and the bathroom and it would be inconsiderate to wake Lester if he were still sleeping. Evan, with a little sigh not entirely free from irritation decided to go and see. He tiptoed out into the passage and into the bathroom and opened the door leading to Lester's room very quietly. Lester *was* still sleeping in a pair of pastel blue silk pyjamas with his head buried in the pillow. Evan stood there regarding him uncertainly for a moment. It would, of course, be unkind to wake him, and yet on the other hand he might possibly sleep until lunch-time and Evan would have to wait nearly three hours for his coffee. He

"You've never heard Irene Marlow sing!" Lester was horrified. "You haven't lived that's all, you just haven't lived! We'll make her sing after lunch, Suki's with her fortunately, he always plays for her. It really is the most lovely voice and there's somebody with an amazing sense of humour! I mean, she really gets herself, which is more than you can say for most prima donnas, and if you could hear her when she's in a real rage with Dwight, —that's Dwight Macadoo who shall be nameless—my God! it's wonderful: bang goes the Italian accent and out pops Iowa!"

"We'd better go and dress, hadn't we?" suggested Evan, feeling unequal to greeting a famous Iowan prima donna in his pyjamas.

"You go and dress," said Lester. "And you might turn on a bath for me when you've finished. I'll go and deal with the visiting firemen."

Evan retired to his room, shattered. It was really appalling luck that these people should have selected to-day of all days to come to lunch. How cross Louise would be. But still, he comforted himself, she'd be sure to get rid of them all as soon as possible.

When he emerged, bathed, shaved and dressed in perfectly cut English country clothes he found everybody in the large living-room. Apparently, while he had been dressing, some more people had arrived. Bonwit was mixing cocktails behind a little bar in the far corner of the room. There was no sign of Louise.

Seeing Evan come in, Lester, who was sitting on the

sofa with a fattish little man and two women, jumped up. "This is my friend," he cried, "I don't think you know my friend! who shall be nameless," he added with a light laugh. Evan smiled sheepishly, he was unused to being nameless, but Lester came over and took him affectionately by the arm. "I must introduce you to everybody," he said. "We'd better begin right here and work round the whole God-damned circle." He raised his voice. "Listen, everybody—this is Evan Lorrimer, one of the greatest living English novelists, he's my friend and I'm mad about him!" He turned enquiringly to Evan. "Aren't I, honey?"

Evan summoned up enough poise to give a little smile and say, "I hope so," whereupon Lester, holding him firmly by the arm, walked him round the room. A slight hush fell while this tour was in progress. Evan shook hands with everyone and responded pleasantly to their assurances of how glad they were to know him, but he was unable to catch more than a few names as he went along, and finally sat down feeling rather confused, in the place on the sofa that Lester had vacated. The fattish little man, he discovered, was Otis Meer, who wrote a famous gossip column for one of the daily papers, and the two women were Irene Marlow and Luella Rosen. Irene was flamboyant, but attractively so, she was dressed in a scarlet sports suit, with a vivid green scarf, her brown hair was done in clusters of curls and her hat—it couldn't have been anyone else's—was on the mantelpiece. Luella Rosen was sharp and black, like a little Jewish

bird, she also was wearing sports clothes, but of a more sombre hue.

Irene smiled, generously exposing a lot of dazzlingly white teeth. "Lester had been telling us all about you," she said—her voice had a trace of a foreign accent—"and you've no idea how thrilled we are to meet you. I haven't read your book yet, but I've got it."

"Mr. Lorrimer has written dozens of books, dear," said Luella.

Irene sat back and closed her eyes in mock despair. "Isn't Luella horrible?" she said. "I'm never allowed to get away with a thing—anyway, I meant your last one, and I know it couldn't matter to you whether I've read it or not; but I really am longing to, particularly now that I've met you." She winked at Evan, a gay, confiding little wink and nudged him with her elbow. Luella gave a staccato laugh. "Irene's our pet moron," she said. "She's never read a book in her life except *Stories of the Operas*. She's just an Iowa girl who's made good, aren't you, darling?"

"Listen, lamb pie," said Irene, "you leave Iowa out of this. What's the matter with Iowa, anyway?"

"Nothing apart from Julia de Martineau," said Otis Meer, and went into a gale of laughter. Irene and Luella laughed too. Evan was naturally unaware of the full piquancy of the joke. At this point an exceedingly handsome man came up and handed him an "old-fashioned."

"This is my dream prince," said Irene. "Dwight, you know Mr. Evan Lorrimer, don't you?"

"We've met already," said Evan, nodding to Dwight who nodded back with a grin and sat down on the floor at their feet, balancing his own drink carefully in his right hand as he did so. "Where the hell's Louise?" he asked.

"Louise has never been known to be on time for anything," said Luella.

Irene turned to Evan. "Isn't Louise a darling? You know she's one of the few really genuine people in the world. I can't bear people who aren't genuine, can you?" Evan made a gesture of agreement and she went on. "Being a writer must be just as bad as being a singer in some ways, having to meet people all the time and look pleased when they say nice things about your books."

"Tough," said Luella. "My heart goes out to you both." She got up and went over to the bar.

"You mustn't pay any attention to Luella," said Irene, comfortingly, observing that Evan looked a trifle nonplussed. "She always goes on like that, she's actually got the kindest heart in the world, sometimes I really don't know what I'd do without her, she's one of our few really genuine friends, isn't she, Dwight?" Dwight looked up and nodded and then stared abstractedly into the fire. At this moment, Louise came into the room with a scream.

"I'm so terribly sorry, everybody——" she wailed. "I overslept." While she was being swamped with greetings, Evan looked at her in horror. She seemed to be a totally different person. Could this be the same

woman whose friendly tranquillity and wise, philosophical outlook had so charmed him last night? Could she have known all these people were coming or was she merely masking her dismay at their appearance and trying to carry everything off with a high hand? If so, she was certainly doing it very convincingly. She seemed to be wholeheartedly delighted to see them. Her eye lighted on him and she came over with her arms round a red-haired woman in black and a small fair man. "My dear," she said, "you really must forgive me—I do hope you slept all right——" She broke off and turned to the red-haired woman. "He's a sleep maniac just like me," she said. Then to Evan again: "You have met everyone, haven't you, and been given a drink and everything?" Evan held up his glass in silent acknowledgment, he was bereft of words, whereupon she snatched it out of his hand. "You must have another at once," she cried. "That looks disgusting," and led him vivaciously to the bar.

During the next half an hour, which Evan spent leaning against the bar, he managed to sort out people a little in his mind. The red-haired woman in black was the Countess Brancati, she had been a Chicago debutante a few years back and had married into the Italian aristocracy. The thin grey man by the window talking to Luella Rosen was her husband. The little fair man was Oswald Roach, commonly known as Ossie. Ossie was a cabaret artist whose speciality was to sing rather bawdy monologues to his own improvisations on the

ukelele. The source of this information was Bonwit, who, although sweating copiously from the efforts of mixing different sorts of drinks for everybody, was willing, almost grateful, for an opportunity to talk. "Who is the thin boy with the pale face?" Evan asked him. Bonwit shook the cocktail-shaker violently. "That's Suki," he said with obvious distaste. "He's a Russian fairy who plays the piano for Irene, he's all right until he gets tight, then he goes cuckoo."

Evan was regarding this phenomenon with interest, when there was a loud commotion in the hall, and two enormous Alsatians sprang into the room followed by a neatly dressed girl in jodhpurs and a fur coat. "I came just as I was," she said, as Louise advanced to kiss her. "I was riding this morning and Shirley wouldn't wait, she's gone into the kitchen to see about food for Chico and Zeppo." She indicated the Alsatians who were running round the room wagging their tails and barking. "I do hope you didn't mind us bringing them, but we couldn't leave them all alone in the apartment for the whole day." Louise gaily assured her that she didn't mind a bit and brought her over to the bar. "Here's someone who's been dying to meet you," she said to Evan. "Leonie Crane, she's written three plays herself, she's one of my closest friends and she's read everything you've ever written." Leonie Crane blushed charmingly and wrung Evan's hand with considerable force. "Not quite all," she said in a well-modulated deep voice. "Louise always exaggerates, but I did think *A Lady of*

doubt about that, if she had not they would all have been dead within the first five minutes; but it was the sort of driving that is liable to react unfavourably on the nerves of anyone who happens to drive himself. Evan had driven for years. He owned a sedate Studebaker in far away green England and frequently conveyed himself back and forth through the country in it, but not at a pace like this, not at seventy miles an hour over an ice-covered road that had frozen so hard that it was like glass. The fact that he was also unaccustomed to a right-hand drive added considerably to his agony. His instinct time and time again was to seize the wheel and swerve over to the left to avoid what seemed to be imminent destruction. Fortunately, however, he restrained himself and sat in frozen misery until at last they turned into a large driveway under tall trees.

On the terrace outside the Hughes-Hitchcocks' house, which was a vast grey structure built on the lines of a French chateau, stood several cars. It was obviously quite a large party. Once inside, his legs felt so shaky after Lester's weight and the rigours of the drive, that he accepted with alacrity the first drink that was offered to him, which was a dry Martini in a glass larger than the cocktail-glasses he was used to. After a little he relaxed sufficiently to look about him. There were at least twenty people in the room apart from his own party which was arriving in groups. His host, a good-looking hearty young man, brought up a fair girl whom he introduced as Mrs. Martin. Evan, as he shook hands

with her, was unable to avoid noticing that she was in an advanced stage of pregnancy. She seemed quite unembarrassed over the situation and looked at him with vague brown eyes. He observed that her fragile young hand was clasping a highball. "Don't be frightened," she said with a simper, "it's not due until Wednesday, and if it doesn't come then I'm going to have a Cæsarian." Evan felt at a loss to know how to reply to such compelling candour, so he smiled wanly. She gave a slight hiccough and said: "Excuse me." Evan fidgeted awkwardly.

"Is that necessary?" he asked, and then flushed to the roots of his hair at the thought that she might imagine he was referring to the hiccough, but she either hadn't noticed or was too drunk to care. "Not necessary," she replied with a little difficulty, "not exactly necessary, but nice work if you can get it," then she drifted away. Presently Lester came up and they went over and sat down together in a window seat. "It's always like this in this house," he said. "Thousands of people milling around—I can't think how they stand it. They're such simple people themselves too, and grand fun, you know, there's no chichi about them, that's what I like and Hughsie——" Here Lester chuckled—"Hughsie's a riot, my dear, if you get Hughsie alone sometimes and get him to tell you some of his experiences in the Navy, he'll slay you; of course he's settled down now, and mind you he adores Sonia, and they've got two of the most enchanting children you've ever seen, but still what's

bred in the bone comes out in the what have you. . . ."

At this moment Otis Meer joined them. "Christ," he whispered to Lester, "Charlie Schofield's still trailing round with that bitch. I thought they were all washed up weeks ago."

"You should know," replied Lester, "if anybody should."

Evan asked for this interesting couple to be pointed out to him.

"That man over by the fireplace, the tall one with the blonde. He's Charlie Schofield, one of our richest playboys. She's Anita Hay, she used to be in 'The Vanities.' Otis hates her," he added, Evan thought rather unnecessarily.

"She's one of these high-hatting dames," said Otis. "She'd high hat her own father if she knew who he was."

"Is she invited everywhere with Mr. Schofield?" enquired Evan, who was puzzled by the social aspects of the situation.

"If she's not he just takes her," replied Lester laconically. "He's been crazy about her for years."

Presently Louise came up with Luella Rosen. "I must apologise for dragging you over here," she said to Evan, "but I absolutely promised we'd come, and they're such darlings really, but I'd no idea there was going to be this crowd—have another drink and we'll go in five minutes."

"Can I drive back with you?" asked Evan wistfully.

"Of course," said Louise. "We'll meet in the hall in about five minutes."

During the next hour Evan was forced to the conclusion that the time sense, in the wealthier strata of American society, was lacking. Louise showed no indication of wanting to leave. Almost immediately after she had promised to meet Evan in the hall in five minutes, she sat down with Mr. Hughes-Hitchcock and began to play backgammon; her laugh rang out several times and Evan wondered bleakly if "Hughsie" were retailing some of his experiences in the Navy.

Lester had disappeared. Otis Meer, Ossie and the Russian pianist were sitting in a corner engrossed in an intense conversation. Irene Marlow was entertaining a large group of people with a description of her first meeting with Geraldine Farrar—a few disjointed sentences came to Evan's ear—"That vast empty stage——" "My clothes were dreadful, after all I was completely unknown then, just an ambitious little girl from Iowa——" "She said with that lovely gracious smile of hers 'My child——'" What Miss Farrar had said was lost to Evan for at that moment Charles Schofield came and spoke to him.

"We haven't been formally introduced," he said amiably, "but I think you know a great friend of mine, the Prince of Wales?" Evan, endeavouring not to betray surprise, nodded casually. "Of course," he said, "although I fear I don't know him very well." Actually he had met the Prince of Wales twice, once at a charity ball at Grosvenor House and once at a supper party at Lady Cynthia Cawthorne's. On both occasions he had

been presented and the Prince had been charming, if a trifle vague; neither conversation could truthfully be said to have established any degree of intimacy.

"He's a grand guy," went on Charlie Schofield, "absolutely genuine. I've played polo with him a lot. Do you play polo?"

"No—I don't ride well enough."

"It's a grand game," said Charlie. "I used to play on Boots Leavenworth's team—you know Boots Leavenworth, of course?"

Evan did not know the Earl of Leavenworth except by repute, but he felt it would sound churlish to go on denying everything. "Rather," he asid, "he's awfully nice."

"I suppose you don't know what's happened about him and Daphne?"

"I think things are much the same," hazarded Evan.

"You mean Rollo's still holding out?"

"When I left England," said Evan boldly, "Rollo was still holding out."

"God!" said Charlie with vehemence. "Aren't people extraordinary! You'd think after all that business at Cannes last summer he'd have the decency to face facts and come out into the open. As a matter of fact, I've always thought he was a bit of a bastard, outwardly amusing enough you know, but something shifty about him. As a matter of fact poor Tiger's the one I'm sorry for, aren't you?"

"Desperately," said Evan.

"Where is Tiger now?"

"I don't know." Evan wildly racked his brains for an appropriate place for Tiger to be. "Africa, I think."

"Jesus!" cried Charlie aghast, "you don't mean to say he's thrown his hand in and left poor Iris to cope with everything?"

The strain was beginning to tell on Evan. He took refuge in evasion. "Rumours," he said weakly. "One hears rumours, you know how people gossip!"

Fortunately at this moment Shirley and Leonie came up and asked him if he'd like to play table-tennis. "We can't play at all," said Shirley, "we're terrible, but it's good exercise." Evan smiled affably at Charlie and went with them into an enormous room glassed in on three sides, furnished only with the table, a few garden chairs and some large plants in pots. It was hotter than a Turkish bath. On the way he confided to them that he didn't play, but would be enchanted to watch them. He sat down, lit a cigarette and they started. They hadn't been playing a minute before he realised how wise he had been to refuse. They played like lightning, grimly, with an agility and concentration that was nothing short of ferocious. He watched them amazed. These two attractive young women, smashing and banging, occasionally muttering the score breathlessly through clenched teeth. Sometimes Leonie gave a savage grunt when she missed a shot, like a prize-fighter receiving a blow in the solar plexus. Presently, they having finished one game and changed round and started

another, Evan began to feel drowsy. The hypnotic effect of following the little white ball back and forth and the monotonous click of the wooden bats lulled him into a sort of coma. Vague thoughts drifted through his mind. He wondered who Rollo was and why he was probably holding out, and what Tiger might have left poor Iris to cope with—Poor Iris—Poor Tiger—Evan slept.

4

At ten minutes past four precisely the Steinhauser party rose from the lunch table and Evan went to his bedroom and shut the door. Lunch had not started until after three. There had been a certain amount of delay while Louise and Lester were rounding everybody up at the Hughes-Hitchcocks'. Then several arguments as to whom should drive back with whom. Evan, with commendable tenacity, considering that he had just been awakened from a deep sleep, had clung to Louise like a leech despite all efforts of Shirley and Leonie to persuade him to go back with them, and finally succeeded in being brought home at a more reasonable speed in Louise's Packard. Lunch had been rather a scramble and consisted principally of clam chowder which he detested and veal cutlets which, not surprisingly, were so overdone as to be almost uneatable. Evan, whose head was splitting, took two aspirin, divested himself of his shoes, trousers and coat, put on his dressing-gown and

lay thankfully on the bed pulling the eiderdown up to his chin. If he could get a real sleep now, he reflected, not just a doze in a chair, and get up at about seven and bath and change, everyone would have assuredly gone. They must all have dinner engagements in New York, and he would be able to dine peaceably with Louise and Bonwit and Lester, allow a polite hour or so for conversation, and go to bed firmly at ten-thirty. The warmth of the eiderdown stole round him, his legs began to congeal pleasantly with a prickling sensation, the throbbing of his head gradually diminished and he fell asleep.

About an hour later he felt himself being dragged to consciousness by somebody shaking him rhythmically. With intense reluctance he opened his eyes and beheld Lester bending over him. He moaned slightly and tried to evade that inexorable hand.

"You must wake up now, honey," said Lester. "You've had over an hour and Irene's going to sing." Evan's mind, still webbed with sleep, tried unsuccessfully to grapple with this announcement. "Who's Irene?" he muttered.

"Don't be silly," said Lester. "Irene Marlow; she's mad about you, she says she won't so much as open her trap unless you're there—we've been trying to persuade her for twenty minutes—she says she'll sing for you or not at all—come on." He flicked the eiderdown off the bed and pulled Evan into a sitting posture. It was no use trying to go to sleep again now, even if Lester had allowed him to. Once wakened up like that he was done

for. He went drearily into the bathroom and sponged his face, then came back and put on his trousers, coat and shoes. Lester, while he did so, lay on the chaise-longue and discoursed enthusiastically upon the quality of Irene's voice, her passion for Dwight Macadoo and the fact that leaving all her success and glamour aside she was really completely genuine. "It's amazing about that boy," he said apropos of Dwight. "Really amazing—she's absolutely nuts about him and although he may be the biggest thing since *Ben Hur* I must say I think he's just plain dumb! Of course, you can't expect him to be anything else really, he was only a cowboy in Arizona when she met him, galloping about on a horse all day in 'chaps,' and rounding up all those God-damned steers—who shall be nameless—well, anyway, she met him out on Grace Burton's ranch and gave her all if you know what I mean, and since that she's taken him everywhere —mind you, I'm not saying he isn't sweet, he is, but he just doesn't utter."

Lester led the way into the living-room. The party was sitting round expectantly. Irene was standing by the piano while Suki, with a cigarette dangling from his lips. was playing a few introductory chords. When Lester and Evan came in everybody said "Shhh" loudly. They sank down on to the floor by the door, Irene flashed Evan a charming smile and started off on "Vissi d'Arte." She sang beautifully. Evan, whose understanding of music was superficial to say the best of it, recognised at once that the quality of her voice and the charm with which

she exploited it was of a very high order indeed. When she had finished "Tosca" everyone gave little groans and cries of pleasure, and someone called for "Boheme." Irene sang "Boheme"; then Ossie implored her to sing the waltz from *The Countess Maritza*. She started this and forgot the words half-way through, so she stopped and sang three songs of Debussy in French, and then some Schumann in German. Evan, being by the door in a draught, wished that she'd stop, the floor was beingning to feel very hard and he was afraid of catching cold. Irene, blissfully unaware that even one of her audience wasn't enjoying her performance to the utmost, went on singing for over an hour. When she finally left the piano and sat down, amid ecstasies of admiration, Evan rose stiffly and went over to the bar. Otis was leaning against it with Shirley and Leonie, Bonwit was still behind it.

"Isn't that the most glorious voice you've ever heard?" cried Ossie. "Frankly I'd rather listen to Irene than Jeritza, Ponselle and Flagstad all together in a lump." Evan, repressing a shudder at the thought of Jeritza, Ponselle and Flagstad all together in a lump, agreed wholeheartedly and asked Bonwit for a drink.

"Martini, 'old-fashioned', Daiquiri, rye and ginger ale, Scotch highball, pay your dime and take your choice," said Bonwit cheerfully. Evan decided on a highball, not that he wished to drink any more for the pleasure of it, but he was chilled by the draught from the door. Bonwit mixed him a strong one, and after a while he began to

feel more cheerful. Louise came over, Evan noticed that she looked very flushed, and dragged Ossie away from the bar. "Darling Ossie, you must," she insisted, "everybody's screaming for you—Lester's gone to get your ukelele, you left it in the hall." Ossie, after some more persuasion, sat down in the middle of the room with his ukelele which Lester had handed to him, and began to tune it. Otis shouted out: "Do 'the Duchess'," and Irene cried, "No, not 'the Duchess,' do 'Mrs. Rabbit'." Louise cried, "No, not 'Mrs. Rabbit', do 'Ella goes to Court'." Several other people made several other suggestions, and there was pandemonium for a few moments. Shirley whispered to Evan, "I do hope he does 'Ella goes to Court', you'll adore it."

Ossie silenced the clamour by striking some loud chords; then he sang "Mrs. Rabbit." "Mrs. Rabbit" was a description, half-sung and half-spoken, of the honeymoon night of an elderly lady from Pittsburg. It was certainly amusing, while leaving little to the imagination. Ossie's rendering of it was expert. He paused, raised his eyebrows, lowered and raised his voice, and pointed every line with brilliantly professional technique. Everyone in the room shouted and wept with laughter. When he had finished with a vivid account of the death of Mrs. Rabbit from sheer excitement, the clamour started again. This time he sang "The Duchess." It was rather on the same lines as "Mrs. Rabbit" although the locale was different. It described a widow from Detroit who married an English Duke and had an affair with a Gondolier during

their honeymoon in Venice. Evan permitted himself to smile tolerantly at Ossie's somewhat stereotyped version of an English Duke. Finally, when he had sung several other songs, all of which varied only in the degree of their pornography, he consented to do "Ella goes to Court." Evan having finished his highball and noticing another close to his elbow, took it hurriedly and braced himself for the worst. "Ella goes to Court" was, if anything, bawdier than the others had been. It was a fanciful description of a middle-aged meat packer's wife from Chicago who, owing to the efforts of an impecunious English Countess, is taken to a Court at Buckingham Palace and becomes intimately attached to a Gentleman-in-Waiting on her way to the Throne Room. The whole song was inexpressibly vulgar, and to an Englishman shocking beyond words. Fortunately the references to the Royal Family were comparatively innocuous; if they had not been Evan would undoubtedly have left the room, but still, as it was, the whole thing with its sly implications, its frequent descents to bar-room crudeness, and above all the ignorance and inaccuracy with which Ossie endeavoured to create his atmosphere, irritated Evan profoundly. Aware that several people were covertly watching him to see how he would take this exhibition, he debated rapidly in his mind whether to look as disgusted as he really felt or to pretend to enjoy it. He took another gulp of his highball and forced an appreciative smile on to his face. A diversion was caused by the noisy entrance of four newcomers. "My

God!" cried Lester. "It's Carola!" There was a general surge towards a smartly dressed woman with bright eyes and still brighter hair who walked in a little ahead of the others. Lester kissed her, Louise kissed her, everybody kissed her except Evan, who was formally introduced a little later by Otis Meer.

Her name was Carola Binney and she was, according to Leonie and Shirley, the most famous and gifted comedienne on the New York stage. Evan vaguely remembered having heard of her at some time or other. She certainly possessed abundant vitality and seemed to be on the most intimate terms with everybody present. The people with her, Evan learned, were Bob and Gloria Hockbridge who were scenario writers from Hollywood, and Don Lucas. There was probably no one in the world, even Evan, who had not heard of Don Lucas. Evan looked at him and really experienced quite a thrill. He was even handsomer in real life than he was on the screen. His young finely modelled face healthily tanned by the sun; his wide shoulders and long curling lashes; his lazy, irresistible charm. There it all was. "It was exactly," thought Evan, "as tho' some clear-eyed, vital young God from the wider spaces of Olympus had suddenly walked into a night club." Lester brought him over. "This is Don Lucas," he said exultantly. "He's just a struggling boy who's trying to make a name for himself and got side-tracked by somebody once saying he was good-looking."

"Nuts, Les!" said the clear-eyed Olympian as he

shook hands. "Glad to know you, Mr. Lorrimer."

Lester, Don and Evan drifted over to the bar where Bonwit, after greeting Don, gave them each a highball. Evan tried to refuse but Lester insisted. "Phoeey!" he cried, placing his arm round Evan's shoulders. "This is a party and life's just one big glorious adventure—which shall be nameless!"

Don, it appeared, was on a three weeks' vacation from Hollywood; he had just completed one picture, "The Loves of Cardinal Richelieu," and was going back on Thursday to start another which was to be called "Tumult," and was based on Tolstoi's *War and Peace*. The Hockbridges were writing it and had apparently done a swell job. Evan glanced across at the Hockbridges. Mr. Hockbridge was a plump bald man in the early forties, while his wife was much younger, possibly not more than twenty-five, with enormous wide blue eyes and platinum blonde hair done in the style of Joan of Arc. Evan tried to imagine them sitting down together and writing the story of *War and Peace* and gave up. After three strong whiskies and sodas such fantasy was beyond him.

Don, within the first few minutes of their conversation, pressed him warmly to come and stay with him when he lectured in Los Angeles. "It's a very simple house," he said. "None of that Spanish crap—all loggias and whatnot, but I can let you have a car and an English valet." "Simple house!" Lester gave a shriek. "It's about as simple as Chartres Cathedral. It's the most gorgeous

place in California." He turned to Evan. "You really must go," he went on. "Seriously, I mean it—it's an experience, if you know what I mean, and when I say experience, well!——" He laughed and dug Don in the ribs.

"It would be grand to have you if you'd come," he said. "You mustn't pay any attention to the way Les goes on—we happened to have a party when he was there and Oh boy!" He shook his handsome head and sighed as though shattered by the memory of it. "But if you came you wouldn't be disturbed. I shall be working all day anyhow—you could do exactly as you liked."

Evan thanked him very much, and said it sounded delightful. Lester went off into further eulogies about the magnificence of Don's house but was interrupted by Louise who came up and placed one arm round Don's waist and the other round Evan's.

"We're all going over to the Grouper Seligmans for just ten minutes," she said. "Carola's longing to see their house; I must say it's unbelievable what they've done with it." Evan gently disentangled himself. "I don't think I'll come if you don't mind," he said. "I've got to go over my notes for my lecture to-morrow night."

There was a shocked silence for a moment, then Louise gave a wail of distress. "Oh my dear," she cried, "please come, just for a few minutes. The Grouper Seligmans will be so bitterly disappointed, they're pining to meet you and they're such darlings."

Evan shook his head. "I'd really rather not," he said firmly.

"Then I won't go either," said Lester.

"Neither will I," said Louise. "We'll none of us go."

Don Lucas patted Evan's shoulder encouragingly. "Come on," he coaxed. "Be a sport."

"They're divine people," said Lester. "They really are, you'll love them, and old Bernadine's a riot; she's Jane Grouper Seligman's mother, you know; you can't go back to Europe without having seen Bernadine Grouper."

"Only for just ten minutes," said Louise. "I shall really feel terribly badly if you don't go—it's quite near, just down the road and the house really is lovely, the most perfect taste, they've spent millions on it——"

"Don't worry him if he'd rather not," said Don. "Let's all have another drink."

Evan, touched by the sympathy in Don's voice and embarrassed by Lester's and Louise's obvious disappointment, gave in. "Very well," he said, "but I really must get back in time to go over my notes before dinner."

Louise's face lit up with pleasure. "Of course you shall," she cried. "You're an angel—the four of us shall go in my car—come on everybody."

5

It was nearly an hour's drive to the Grouper Seligman's house, and in the car Lester suggested playing a word game to pass the time. Evan didn't care for word games, but as he couldn't very well sit in morose silence he capitulated with as good a grace as possible. They played "Who am I?" and "Twenty Questions" and "Shedding Light." Evan acquitted himself favourably and, owing to his superior knowledge of history, won reverent praise for his erudition in "Twenty Questions."

"Shedding Light" bewildered him, but he was glad to see that it bewildered Don Lucas even more. As a matter of fact everything bewildered Don Lucas; his contributions consisted mainly of the names of obscure baseball players and movie directors, but he persevered with naïve charm in the face of the most waspish comments from Lester. Suddenly the games were interrupted by the chauffeur taking a wrong turning and arriving, after a few minutes of violent bumping, on to the edge of a swamp. Louise, who had been too occupied in trying to think of a Spanish seventeenth century painter beginning with M to notice, leant forward, slid back the glass window and shouted a lot of instructions, most of which Lester contradicted. "We ought to have turned to the left by the bridge, I know we ought," she said.

"If we'd done that we should have arrived at the Witherspoons'," said Lester. "And God forbid that we should do that."

"Nonsense," cried Louise. "The Witherspoons' are right over on the other side near the Caldicotts."

"If," said Lester with a trace of irritation, "we had gone up that turning just past the Obermeyers' gate and then on over the hill we should have got into the high-way and been able to turn right at the cross roads."

"Left," said Louise. "If you turn right at the cross roads, you come straight to the golf course, and that's miles away, just next to the Schaeffers'."

"You'd better back," said Lester to the chauffeur. "And when you get into the main road again stop at the first petrol station and ask."

Presently after some more bumping and a frightening moment when the frozen surface of the ground nearly caused the car to skid into a ditch, they emerged again on to the main road. About a quarter of an hour later, having followed the instructions of a negro at a petrol station, and gone back the way they had come for a few miles, they turned up a small lane and arrived at the Grouper Seligmans. The rest of their party had naturally arrived some time before and everybody was playing skittles in a luxurious skittle alley with a bathing pool on one side of it and a bar on the other. Mr. and Mrs. Grouper Seligman came forward to meet them both grasping large wooden balls. They were a good-looking

young couple in bathing costume. "This is wonderful," cried Mrs. Grouper Seligman. "We thought you were dead, we're just going to finish this game, have one more drink and then go in the pool—go and talk to mother, she's stinking!"

Mr. Grouper Seligman led them to the bar where the members of his own house-party were sitting on high stools apparently having relinquished the joys of the alley and the pool to the invaders. Old Mrs. Grouper, elaborately coiffed and wearing a maroon tea-gown and a dog-collar of pearls, greeted Evan warmly. "You may or may not know it," she said in a harsh, bass voice, "but you're my favourite man!"

Evan bowed politely and tried to withdraw his hand, but she tightened her grasp and pulled him towards her. "That book of yours," she said portentously, and cast a furtive look over her shoulder as though she were about to impart some scurrilous secret, "is great literature—No, it's no use saying it isn't because I know—Henry James used to be an intimate friend of mine and I knew poor Edith Wharton too, and believe me," her voice sank to a hoarse whisper, "I *know*." She relaxed Evan's hand so suddenly that he nearly fell over backwards. At that moment his host gave him an "old-fashioned" with one hand and piloted him with the other up to an emaciated dark woman in a flowered dinner dress.

"Alice," he said, "you English ought to get together —this is a countryman of yours—Mr. Lorrimer—Lady

Kettering." Lady Kettering shook hands with him wearily and gave an absent smile. "How do you do," she said. The sound of an English voice comforted Evan, he hoisted himself on to a vacant stool next to her. Mr. Grouper Seligman having done his duty as a host, left them. "What a lovely house," said Evan. Lady Kettering looked at him in surprise and then glanced round as though she were seeing it all for the first time. "I suppose it is," she replied, "if you like this sort of thing."

Evan felt a little crushed. "Of course I haven't seen much of it, I've only just arrived."

"I've been here for three months," said Lady Kettering, "and I must say it's beginning to get me down. I'm going to Palm Beach next week. I think Palm Beach is bloody, don't you?"

"I've never been there," said Evan.

"Well, take my advice and don't go. It's filled with the most frightening people."

"I shan't be able to anyhow," said Evan. "I'm over here to do a lecture tour."

"How horrible," said Lady Kettering. "Whatever for?"

"My publishers were very insistent that I should." Evan was slightly nettled. "And after all I think it will be interesting to see something of America. This is my first visit."

"You ought to go to Mexico," said Lady Kettering. "That's where you ought to go."

"I'm afraid I shan't have time."

"That's the one thing you don't need in Mexico—Time doesn't exist—it's heaven."

"Why don't you go to Mexico instead of Palm Beach?"

"I've promised to join the Edelstons' yacht and go on a cruise in the Bahamas," said Lady Kettering. "Do you know the Edelstons?"

"No," replied Evan.

"Well, take my advice," she said, "and give them a wide berth. They're bloody."

At this moment Don Lucas came and prised Evan gently off his stool. "Come and swim," he said.

The idea of swimming on a Sunday evening in mid-February seemed fantastic to Evan. "I don't think I will."

"Come on, be a sport."

"I'd rather watch you."

"Nuts to that," cried Don. "Everybody's going to swim, it'll be swell."

Evan allowed himself to be led over to the pool, inwardly vowing that no power on earth would get him into the water. Leonie and Shirley were giving an exhibition of fancy diving from the highest board, while Louise, Lester, Carola Binney, Irene Marlow and Ossie, who were already in bathing suits, sat round the edge and applauded. "Isn't that amazing?" cried Lester as Leonie did a spectacular Jack knife. "I'd give anything in the world to be able to dive like that, but everything, if you know what I mean!"

Don took Evan firmly into a richly appointed men's

dressing-room and handed him a pair of trunks. "Now undress," he ordered.

Once more Evan protested. "Really I'd rather not——"

"What the hell——" said Don. "The water's warm and we'll all have fun—come on, be a pal——"

"Honestly——" began Evan.

"Now listen here," Don sat down on a bench and looked at Evan reproachfully, "this is a party and we're all having a good time and you're just bent on spoiling the whole shooting match."

"Why should you be so anxious for me to swim?" asked Evan almost petulantly.

"Because I like you," said Don with a disarming smile. "I liked you from the word go and you like me too, don't you? Come on, be frank and admit it."

"Of course I like you," said Evan. "I like you very much."

"Very well then," said Don triumphantly. "Do we swim or don't we?"

"You do and I don't."

"You wouldn't like me to get tough now, would you?" said Dŏn in a wheedling voice, but with an undertone of menace. "I could, you know!"

"I'm sure you could, but I fail to see——"

"Come on now, quit stalling." Don advanced towards him and forcibly removed his coat. For one moment Evan contemplated screaming for help, but visualising the ridiculous scene that would ensue he contented himself with struggling silently in Don's

grasp. "Please let me go," he muttered breathlessly, "and don't be so silly."

Don had succeeded in slipping Evan's braces off and was endeavouring to unbutton his shirt when Lester came in. "Boys, boys," he cried admonishingly, "do try to remember that this is Sunday—which shall be nameless," and went into gales of laughter. Don released Evan immediately.

"This guy's a big sissy," he said. "He won't swim."

"I don't blame him," said Lester. "The water's like Bouillebaise. It's got more things in it than Macey's window."

"To hell with that, I'm going to swim if it kills me."

"It probably will on top of all that liquor." Lester went over and took a packet of cigarettes out of the pocket of his coat which was hanging on a peg. Then he came and sat on the bench next to Evan who, with a flushed face was adjusting his clothes. "Relax, honey," he said, "Don always goes on like this when he's had a few drinks. Have a camel?"

Evan took a cigarette, meanwhile Don was tearing off his clothes with ferocious speed. When he was completely naked he stood over Lester and Evan with arms folded and regarded them with scorn. Lester looked up at him. "It's all right, Puss," he said, "we've seen all all that and it's gorgeous, now go jump in the pool and sober up."

"I don't know what's the matter with you guys," he grumbled, and went towards the door.

"You'd better put on some trunks," said Lester, "or have I gone too far?"

Don came slowly back and put on a pair of trunks. "Funny, hey?" he said bitterly and went out. A moment later they heard a loud splash and a shriek of laughter.

"What about another little drinkie?" said Lester.

6

About an hour later Evan found himself in a car sitting between Carola Binney and Luella Rosen whom he hadn't spoken to since before lunch. Don and Lester were squeezed together in the front seat next to Dwight Macadoo who was driving. The car apparently belonged to Irene Marlow. Evan had had two more "old fashioneds" since his struggle with Don and was drunk, but in a detached sort of way. He had lost all capacity for resistance. From now on, he decided, he would drink when he was told to, eat when he was told to and go where he was taken. There was no sense in fighting against overwhelming odds. He lay back, quite contentedly, with his head on Luella's shoulder and listened to Carola describing a man called Benny Schultz who had directed a play she had tried out in Boston last September—

"Never again—" she was saying vehemently, "would I let that rat come within three blocks of me—My God—you've no idea what I went through—he comes

prancing into my dressing-room on the opening night after the first Act—the first Act! believe it or not, and starts giving me notes—'Listen, Benny,' I said, 'you may have directed *Crazy Guilt* and *Mother's Day* and *The Wings of a Dove*, and you may have made Martha Cadman the actress she is, and Claudia Biltmore the actress she certainly isn't, but you're not coming to my room on an opening night and start telling me that my tempo was too fast and that I struck a wrong note by taking my hat off at my first entrance. To begin with I had to take that God awful hat off which I never wanted to wear anyway because the elastic band at the back was slipping, and if I hadn't it would have shot up into the air and got a laugh in the middle of my scene with Edgar; in the second place if you had engaged a supporting company for me who could act and a leading man who had some idea of playing comedy, and at least knew his lines, I wouldn't have had to rush through like a fire engine in order to carry that bunch of art-theatre hams and put the play over, and in the third place I should like to remind you that I was a star on Broadway when you were selling papers on the East side, and I knew more about acting than you when I was five, playing the fit-ups with *The Two Orphans*. And what's more, if you think I'm going to tear myself to shreds trying to get laughs in the supper scene in the pitch dark—well, you're crazy——'" She paused for a moment, Luella gave a barely audible grunt.

"You've got to have light to play comedy," she went

on, "and all the phoney highbrow directors in the world won't convince me otherwise."

"For all that I think Benny's pretty good," said Luella.

"He's all right with Shakespeare. I give you that," said Carola. "His Macbeth was fine, what you could see of it, but comedy never—look at the flop he had with *Some Take it Straight.*"

"*Some Take it Straight* was the worst play I ever sat through," Luella admitted.

"It needn't have been," cried Carola. "I read the original script. They wanted me to do it with Will Farrow, it really wasn't bad apart from needing a little fixing here and there—then that rat got hold of it and bitched it entirely."

Lester let the window down. "What's Carola yelling about," he enquired.

"Benny Schultz," said Luella.

"I wouldn't trust him an inch, not an inch," said Lester. "Look what he did to Macbeth."

"Are we nearly home?" asked Evan.

"We're not going home—we're going to Maisie's."

Evan lifted his head from Luella's shoulder. "Who's she?" he asked sleepily.

"She's divine," replied Lester. "You'll worship her —I mean she's a real person, isn't she, Luella?"

"It depends what you call real," said Luella. "Personally she drives me mad."

At this point the car turned into a gateway and drew up before a low, rather rambling white-walled house.

Everyone got out and stamped their feet on the frozen snow to keep warm, while they waited for the door to be opened, which it presently was by a large forbidding-looking Swedish woman who regarded them suspiciously. Lester embraced her. "It's all right, Hilda," he said, "it's only us."

She stood aside and they all trooped in, shedding their coats in the hall. Lester led the way into a sort of studio panelled in pitch pine with wide bow windows and an immense log fire. The room was luxuriously furnished in a style that Evan supposed was early American. Anyhow in spite of its being extremely over-heated, its simplicity was a relief after the other houses he had visited. He felt as though he had been going from house to house all his life. A grizzled woman with fine eyes and wearing a riding habit greeted them brusquely and introduced the other people in the room. There were two girls called Peggy and Althea, one fat and the other thin, a very pale young man in green Chinese pyjamas called George Tremlett, and a statuesque Frenchwoman with raven hair who appeared to be dressed as a Bavarian peasant. The only two members of their own party present were Leonie and Shirley who were lying on the floor playing with a Siamese cat. There was a large table of drinks along one of the windows. Don Lucas made a bee-line for it. "Donny wants some fire water," he said. "Donny wants to get stinking."

"You were stinking at the Grouper Seligmans'," said Luella.

"Isn't he beautiful," said the Frenchwoman.

When everyone had helped themselves to drinks Evan found himself sitting on a small upright sofa with George Tremlett.

"You arrived in the middle of a blazing row," whispered George with a giggle. "Suzanne and Shirley haven't spoken for two years and suddenly in she walked with Leonie——"

"Which is Suzanne?"

"The dark woman, Suzanne Closanges. She writes poetry either in French or English, she doesn't care which, and she lives here with Maisie."

"Maisie who?" asked Evan.

"Maisie Todd, of course," said George with slight irritation. "This is Maisie Todd's house—I did it."

"How do you mean 'did it'?"

"Designed it," George almost squealed. "I'm George Tremlett."

"How do you do?" said Evan.

"It was lovely doing this house," went on George, "because I had an absolutely free hand—Maisie's like that—we had the grandest time driving all over New England and finding bits and pieces here and there. I found this very sofa we're sitting on tucked away in a fisherman's bedroom at Cape Cod."

"How extraordinary," said Evan—he felt overpoweringly sleepy.

Leonie came over with the Siamese cat and placed it on Evan's lap. "Isn't he adorable?" she said. "I gave him

to Maisie for a Christmas present in 1933 and he's grown out of all knowledge."

The cat arched its back, dug its claws into Evan's leg and with a loud snarl hurled itself to the floor. "They're very fierce," went on Leonie picking it up again by the nape of its neck so that it hung spitting and kicking in the air. "And the older they grow the fiercer they get, but Dante isn't fierce though he's older than hell—are you, my darling?" she added affectionately, kissing it on the side of the head. The cat gave a sharp wriggle and scratched her cheek, from her eye, which it missed by a fraction, to her chin. She screamed with pain and dropped it on to a table where it knocked over and smashed a photograph of a lady in fencing costume framed in glass, jumped down and disappeared behind a writing-desk. Evan started to his feet, everyone came crowding over.

"The son of a bitch," wailed Leonie. "He's maimed me for life." With that she burst into tears. Maisie Todd took charge with fine efficiency. She produced a large white handkerchief to staunch the blood, dispatched George to fetch some iodine from her bathroom. Shirley flung her arms round Leonie and kissed her wildly. "Don't darling, don't cry," she besought her. "For God's sake don't cry, you know I can't bear it."

"There's nothing to cry about," said Maisie, "it's only a scratch."

"It may only be a scratch," cried Shirley, "but it's terribly deep and it's bleeding."

"Don't fuss," said Maisie.

"It's all very fine for you to say 'don't fuss'," Shirley said furiously, "but it might very easily have blinded her —you oughtn't to keep an animal like that in the house, it should be destroyed."

"Leonie gave it to Maisie herself before she knew you," put in Suzanne with a little laugh.

"Mind your own business," snapped Shirley.

Leonie dabbed her eyes and her cheeks alternately with the blood-stained handkerchief.

"For God's sake shut up, everybody. I'm all right now, it was only the shock."

"Drink this, darling," said Lester, handing her his glass.

"We should never have come—I knew something awful would happen," said Shirley.

"There is nothing to prevent you going." Suzanne spoke with icy dignity. There was a horrified silence for a moment. Shirley left Leonie and went very close to Suzanne.

"How dare you," she said softly. Evan noticed that she was trembling with passion. "How dare you speak to me like that——"

Maisie intervened. "Now listen, Shirley," she began. Shirley pushed her aside. "I've always disliked you, Suzanne, from the first moment I set eyes on you, and I wish to say here and now that you're nothing but a fifth-rate gold-digger sponging on Maisie the way you do and making her pay to publish your lousy French

poems, and you're not even French at that—you're Belgian!"

Suzanne gave a gasp of fury, slapped Shirley hard in the face and rushed from the room, cannoning into George Tremlett who was coming in with the iodine and knocking the bottle out of his hand on to the floor. "Oh, dear!" he cried sinking on to his knees. "All over the best Hook rug in the house!"

From then onwards everybody talked at once. Maisie dashed out of the room after Suzanne; Leonie started to cry again. The two girls, Althea and Peggy, who had been watching the whole scene from a corner, decided after a rapid conversation to follow Maisie and Suzanne, which they did, slamming the door after them. George was moaning over the Hook rug and trying to rub out the iodine stains with a silk scarf. Lester joined Luella and Carola by the fireplace, Carola was protesting violently at Suzanne's behaviour, while Luella smiled cynically. Lester, genuinely distressed, was sympathising with Shirley and Leonie, while Don added to the din by strolling over to the piano with Dwight Macadoo and playing "Smoke Gets in your Eyes" with one hand. Presently he desisted. "This piano stinks," he said. "No tone—where's the radio?" Before he could find it Luella, to Evan's intense relief, suggested that they should all go, and led the way firmly into the hall. While they were struggling into their coats and wraps the large Swedish woman watched them silently with a baleful expression. The freezing night air struck Evan like a

blow between the eyes; he staggered slightly. Don quickly lifted him off the ground and deposited him in the car with infinite tenderness.

"You were wrong about that swim," he said affectionately. "It was swell, made me feel like a million dollars. Now we'll go home and have a little drinkie."

7

They had no sooner got inside the Steinhausers' front door when Irene came rushing out of the living-room. "Where the hell have you been?" she cried angrily to Dwight. "I looked for you all over and when I came out you'd gone off in my car."

"Now don't be mad at me, darling——" began Dwight.

"Mad at you! I've never been madder in my life—come in here." She dragged him into the library and banged the door.

"Well," said Lester, "isn't she the cutest thing—My dear!" He waved his hand benevolently after them. "These Prima Donnas—who shall be nameless——"

Louise appeared with a great cry and flung her arms round Evan. He was dimly aware that she had changed into a long flowing tea-gown. "*There* you are," she said, "I couldn't think what had happened to you—you must be starving." Still holding him tightly she pulled him into the living-room which had undergone a startling

change. All the furniture had been pushed out on to the Sun Porch with the exception of the chairs which were arranged round the walls. An enormous buffet loaded with hams, turkeys, salads, bowls of fruit, bowls of cream, two large cakes and piles of plates, stood along one side of the room. Another smaller table for drinks was joined on to the bar behind which Bonwit was still officiating, assisted by a Japanese in a white coat. There were at least fifty people in the room and the noise was deafening. Evan, dazed as he was, distinguished the Grouper Seligmans, Lady Kettering, and several of the people he had seen at the Hughes-Hitchcocks, including the young expectant mother who was sitting on the floor with her back against one of the piano legs, and a large plate of variegated food on her lap, apparently in a stupor, while Suki played an unending series of complicated syncopation in her ear.

Louise led Evan to the table and gave him a plate on which she piled, with professional speed, a turkey leg, Virginia ham, baked beans, a fish cake, potato salad, lettuce, a wedge of Camembert cheese and a large slice of strange-looking brown bread. "There," she said, "now sit down quietly, and eat, you poor dear." With that she whisked away from him and rushed across to Carola and Luella. He looked round for a vacant chair but there wasn't one, so he stayed where he was and ate standing against the table. The food was certainly good although there was far too much of it on his plate. He was about to slide the cheese and one of the slices of

ham into an empty bowl that had held salad when he was arrested by Charlie Schofield putting his hand on his shoulder. He jumped guiltily as though he'd been caught in the act of doing something nefarious.

"I told Alice Kettering what you said about Tiger being in Africa," said Charlie, "and she's in an awful state—she was crazy about him for years you know."

Before Evan could reply Don came up and forced a glass into his hand. "I promised you a little drinkie," he said genially, "and a little drinkie you're going to have."

A big woman in yellow put her arm through Charlie Schofield's and led him away. Evan saw out of the corner of his eye that Lady Kettering was drifting towards him. He retreated on to the Sun Porch followed by Don looking very puzzled.

"What's the idea?"

"Just somebody I don't want to talk to," said Evan with as much nonchalance as he could muster.

"Listen, Pal," said Don. "If there's anyone you don't like just you tip me off and I'll sock 'em."

Evan, shuddering inwardly at the thought of Don socking Lady Kettering, muttered that it was of no importance really, and leant against the window. Outside the moon had come up and the sea shone eerily in its light like grey silk; far away in the distance a lighthouse flashed. It all looked so remote and quiet that Evan felt inclined to weep. Don squeezed his arm reassuringly. "You know I like you," he said, "I like you better

than any Englishman I've ever met. Most Englishmen are high hat, you know, kind of snooty, but you're not high hat at all, you're a good sport."

"Thank you," said Evan dimly.

"I hope you weren't sore at me for trying to make you go in the pool," Don went on. "I wouldn't like to have you sore at me. It isn't often I get a chance to talk to anyone really intelligent—not that you're only just intelligent, you're brilliant, otherwise you wouldn't be able to write all those God-damned books, would you now?"

"Well," began Evan, feeling that some reply was demanded.

"Now don't argue." Don's voice was fierce. "Of course you're brilliant and you know you are, don't you?"

Evan smiled. "I wouldn't exactly say——"

Don patted his hand tolerantly. "Of course you do—everybody knows when they're brilliant, they'd be damned fools if they didn't. Jesus, the way you played that question game in the car—if that wasn't brilliant I should like to know what is? But what I mean to say is this: I'm just a simple sort of guy, really, without any brains at all—I've got looks, I grant you that otherwise I shouldn't be where I am to-day should I? But no brains, not a one. Why, the idea of sitting down and writing a letter drives me crazy let alone a book. Sometimes when I look at something beautiful like all that," he indicated the view, "or when I run across someone

really brilliant like you are I feel low—honest to God I do——"

"Why?" said Evan.

"Because I'm such a damn fool of course. I couldn't write down what that looks like to me, not if you paid me a million dollars I couldn't. I couldn't paint it either, I couldn't even talk about it. What do I get out of life I ask you? Money, yes—I make a lot of dough and so what—Happiness, no—I'm one of the unhappiest sons of bitches in the whole world," he broke off.

"Cheer up," said Evan as cheerfully as he could. He was feeling depressed himself.

"It gets me down," murmured Don, pressing his forehead against the glass of the window. "It just gets me down."

Evan was pained and embarrassed to observe that he was crying. A concerted scream of laughter came from the living-room. Evan peeped in. Everyone was grouped round Carola who, with a man's Homburg hat perched on her head, was doing an imitation of somebody. Evan glanced back at Don, who was still staring out into the night; his shoulders were heaving. Now was the moment to escape, everyone was far too occupied to notice whether he was there or not; if he could get into the hall without Louise seeing him, the rest was easy; he could get into his room, lock the door and go to bed. He crept along behind the buffet, avoiding Mr. Hockbridge, who was asleep on a chair, and reached the hall in safety. From behind the closed door of the library

came sounds of strife, apparently Irene's fury at Dwight had in no way abated. Evan paused long enough to hear her scream angrily—"It was Luella's fault, was it—we'll see about that!"—then he darted down the passage, through Lester's room and the bathroom and reached his own room with a sigh of relief. He switched on the lights by the door and started back in horror. Stretched out on his bed was a woman in a heavy sleep. On closer examination he recognised the Countess Brancati. Her black dress was rumpled and her hair was spread over the pillow like pink hay.

A great rage shook Evan to the core. He seized her by the shoulder and pushed her backwards and forwards violently; she continued to sleep undisturbed. He knelt down on the floor by the bed and shouted "Wake up —please wake up" in her face to which she replied with a low moan. He shook her again and one of her ear-rings fell off; he picked it up and put it on the bed table and stood there looking at her, his whole body trembling with fury and frustration. He gave her one more despairing shove but she paid no attention. Then, with an expression of set determination he marched back to the living-room. On his way he met Bonwit emerging from the library. "My God," Bonwit said, "there's all hell breaking loose in there," and then, noticing Evan's face, "what's happened to you?"

"There's a woman on my bed," Evan almost shouted.

"I'll bet it's Mary Lou Brancati," said Bonwit. "She

always passes out somewhere—come on—we'll get her out."

They went back together. The countess had turned over on to her face. Bonwit slapped her behind; she wriggled slightly and he did it again harder. Presently, after several more whacks, she turned over and muttered, "G'way and leave me alone——" Bonwit whereupon hoisted her up on to the side of the bed and shook her. She opened her eyes and looked at him malevolently. "Get the hell away from me," she said. "What d'you think you're doing!"

"Come on, baby," said Bonwit, "you're missing everything. There's a party going on."

"To hell with it," she replied. "G'way and leave me alone."

"Take her other arm," ordered Bonwit. Evan obeyed and they hauled her struggling and protesting into the bathroom. There Bonwit dabbed her face with a wet sponge; she gave a scream and tried to hit him. Finally they got her into the hall and deposited her in a chair. Bonwit slapped his hands together as though he had just felled a tree and said, "Now you're Okay, fellar."

At that moment the hall suddenly filled with people. Louise came out of the library with her arms around Irene who was sobbing. Dwight followed them miserably. Unfortunately Luella and Otis Meer came out of the living-room at the same instant followed by Lester, Lady Kettering and the Grouper Seligmans. Irene, catching sight of Luella, wrested herself from Louise's

arms. "So you're still here," she said harshly. "I'm surprised you have the nerve!"

Luella looked at her coolly. "You're tight, Irene," she said. "You'd better go home."

"You're a snake!" cried Irene, breathing heavily. "A double-faced, rotten snake!"

Lester tried to calm her. "Look here, honey," he said, "there's no cause in getting yourself all worked up."

Irene pushed him aside. "You shut up—you're as bad as she is—you're all of you jealous of Dwight and me and always have been—Luella's been trying to get him for years, and if you think I'm so dumb that I haven't seen what's been going on you're crazy."

"Really," murmured Lady Kettering. "This is too bloody—we'd better go——"

"Go and be damned to you!" said Irene.

Louise gave a cry of distress. Lady Kettering turned and tried to make a dignified exit into the living-room, but was prevented by Ossie, Suki, the Hughes-Hitchcocks and Mrs. Hockbridge, who had crowded into the doorway to see what was happening.

Luella seized Irene by the arm in a grip of steel. "Behave yourself," she hissed. "What do you mean by making a disgusting scene like this about nothing?"

"Nothing!" Irene screamed and writhed in Luella's grasp. Otis Meer gave a cackle of shrill laughter. Dwight tried to coax Irene back into the library. Louise wept loudly and was comforted by Lester and Ossie. Lady Kettering struggled valiantly through the crowd to try to

find her cloak. Carola, who had joined the group with Shirley and Leonie, announced in ringing tones that in her opinion the possession of an adequate singing voice was hardly sufficient excuse for behaving like a Broadway floosie. Lester turned on her and told her to shut up and not make everything worse, and in the indescribable pandemonium that ensued, Evan fled.

8

About an hour later, Evan, sitting up rigidly in his bed, began to relax. He had brushed his teeth, taken three aspirins, undressed, tried to lock the door but discovered there was no key, and read four chapters of *Sense and Sensibility* which he always travelled with as a gentle soporific. He had left no stone unturned in his efforts to drag his aching mind away from the horrors he had endured. He had turned out the light twice and attempted to sleep but to no avail. Incidents of the day, people's names, unrelated scraps of conversation crowded into his brain, making even the possibility of lying still out of the question let alone sleep. Sleep was aeons away, he felt that it was well within the bounds of probability that he would never sleep again. The thought of the lecture he had to give that very night, it was now three a.m., tortured him. He felt incapable of uttering one coherent phrase and as for talking for an hour, his mind reeled at the very idea of it. The continual noise, the

endless arrivals and departures, the impact of so many different atmospheres and personalities, the unleashing of vulgar passion he had witnessed, to say nothing of the incredible amount of alcohol he had drunk, had lacerated his nerves beyond bearing. He was outraged, shamed, exhausted and bitterly angry.

Now at last he was beginning to feel calmer. The three aspirins he had taken had made his heart thump rather, his maximum dose as a rule being two, but it was apparently taking effect. He glanced at his watch, ten minutes past three, if he could manage to sleep until eleven he would have had nearly his eight hours and probably be able to get in an extra hour at his hotel before his lecture if he wasn't too nervous. "I'll give myself another ten minutes," he reflected, "and then turn out the light, by that time it ought to be all right."

He lay there still as a mouse, resolutely emptying his mind and concentrating on gentle, peaceful things, the waves of the sea, a vast four-poster bed in some remote English country house, the cool, soft lavender-scented sheets, the soughing of the wind outside in the elms—— At this moment the door opened and Bonwit came in on tip-toe. He was in his pyjamas and carrying a pillow and an eiderdown. He looked relieved when he saw that Evan wasn't asleep.

"I'm awfully sorry, fellar," he said, "but I've got to come and use your other bed—there's been all hell going on. Irene drove off in her car with Dwight, leaving Suki and Luella behind, the Brancatis went too, leaving Ossie

and Otis, and we've only just found Don Lucas—he's in the living-room on the sofa. Ossie and Otis are in with Lester, Luella's in with Louise and Suki's in my room. I've got to get up at seven to go into town but don't be afraid I'll disturb you—I've left my clothes in the bathroom so as I can dress in there."

"Oh," said Evan hopelessly, the blackness of despair made further utterance impossible.

Bonwit clambered into bed and switched off his light. "I'm all in," he said. "Good night, fellar."

Evan switched off his light too, and lay staring into the darkness.

In a remarkably short space of time Bonwit began to snore. Evan groaned and tried to fold the pillow over his ears, but it was no good, the snores grew louder. They rose rhythmically to a certain pitch and then died away. Occasionally the rhythm would be broken by a grunt, then there would be silence for a moment, then they'd start again. Evan, after a half an hour of it, suddenly leapt up on an impulse of pure blinding rage, switched on the light and went over to Bonwit's bed and stood looking at him. Bonwit was lying on his back with his mouth wide open—the noise issuing from it was incredible. Evan, flinging all gentleness and consideration to the winds, seized him violently by the shoulders and turned him over. Bonwit gave a terrific snort, turned back again almost immediately and went on snoring louder than ever. Evan began to cry, tears coursed down his cheeks and fell on to his pyjamas—panic assailed him

—if this went on he would definitely go mad. He walked up and down the room fighting to prevent himself from losing control utterly and shrieking the house down. He went over to the window and looked out. The night was crystal clear, there wasn't a cloud in the sky. Suddenly he knew what he was going to do, the idea came to him in a flash. He was going away, that's what he was going to do. He was going to dress, telephone for a taxi and leave that horrible house for ever. It was idiotic not to have thought of it before. He would leave a note for Louise in the hall asking her to bring his suit-case into New York with her. He tore off his pyjamas and began to dress. Bonwit stopped snoring and turned over, Evan switched off the light and stood still hardly daring to breathe. If Bonwit woke up and caught him trying to escape, he'd obviously try to prevent him—there would be arguments and persuasions and protests, probably ending in the whole house being roused.

Bonwit started to snore again and Evan, with a sigh of relief, finished dressing. Holding his shoes in his hand he crept down the passage, through the bathroom and into Lester's room. He could dimly make out two forms in one bed and one in the other. He banged against a chair on his way to the door and immediately lay down flat on the floor. Lester moved in his sleep but didn't wake; finally, on hands and knees, Evan crawled out into the other passage and into the hall. Once there, he put on his shoes and went cautiously in search of the telephone; just as he was about to go into the library he

remembered that it was in the bar, he had heard Bonwit using it before lunch. He went into the living-room. The curtains were not drawn and moonlight was flooding through the windows. Don was sleeping soundly on a sofa, he looked rather debauched but extraordinarily handsome. Poor Don. Evan shook his head at him sorrowfully and went over to the bar. There was a shutter down over it which was padlocked. This was a terrible blow, Evan thought for a moment of going back and waking Bonwit; but decided against it. If there was no taxi he'd walk and if he didn't know the way he'd find it, at all events he knew he would rather die in the snow than spend one more hour in that house. He scribbled a note to Louise in the library. "Dear Mrs. Steinhauser——" He debated for a moment whether or not to address her as Louise, she had certainly kissed him several times during the day and called him Darling frequently, also he knew her to be a kindly, well-intentioned woman, although at the moment he could cheerfully have strangled her. On the whole he felt that Mrs. Steinhauser better expressed the manner in which he was leaving her house. "Dear Mrs. Steinhauser—— Finding myself unable to sleep I have decided to go back to New York. Please forgive this unconventional departure, but it is essential, if I am to lecture with any degree of success, that I relax for several hours beforehand. Please don't worry about me, I am sure I shall find my way to the station quite easily, but if you would be so kind as to have my suit-case packed and bring it in with

you to-morrow, I should be more than grateful. With many thanks for your delightful hospitality I am, yours sincerely, Evan Lorrimer." He signed his name with a flourish. 'She can stick that in her damned visitors' book,' he said to himself. He left the note in a prominent position on a table in the hall, found his hat and coat in a cupboard and let himself quietly out of the front door. The cold air exhilarated him. It was odd, he reflected, how the excitement of escape had completely banished his nervous hysteria. He felt surprisingly well, all things considered. The snow shone in the moonlight and the country lay around him white and still. He noticed a glow in the sky behind a hill. That must be a village, he thought, and set off jauntily down the drive.

About an hour later, when he had walked several miles and his adventurous spirit had begun to wilt a trifle, he was picked up by a milk van. The driver was rugged and friendly and agreed to take him to the nearest station. They had some coffee together in an all-night lunch room when they got there; the next train for New York wasn't due for three-quarters of an hour, and the driver talked freely about his home and domestic affairs with an accent that Evan found at moments, extremely difficult to understand. Finally he drove away in his van having allowed Evan to pay for the coffee, but refused to accept two dollars.

"Nuts to that," he said with a laugh. "I like you—you're not high hat and kind of snooty like most Englishmen—— So long, buddy."

Buddy, warmed by this tribute, went on to the platform and waited for the train.

When he arrived in New York it was daylight. The night-porter at his hotel greeted him in some surprise and handed him a pile of telephone messages and a letter. When he got to his room he opened the letter first. "Dear Mr. Lorrimer," he read, "Although we have never met, your books have given me so much pleasure that I am taking this opportunity of welcoming you to Chicago, where I understand you are going to talk to us next week on 'History and the Modern Novel.' My husband and I would be so pleased if you would come out to us for the week-end after your lecture. Our home is on the edge of the lake and we flatter ourselves it is the nearest approach to an English country house that you could find in the whole of the Middle West. It is peaceful and quiet, and no one would disturb you, you could just rest. If you have anyone with you we should, of course, be delighted to receive them, too. My husband joins me in the hope that you will honour us by accepting. Yours very sincerely, Irma Weinkopf." Evan undressed thoughtfully and got into bed.

Cheap Excursion

JIMMY said, "Good night, Miss Reed," as she passed him in the passage. He did it ordinarily, no overtones or undertones, not the slightest indication of any secret knowledge between them, not even a glint in his eye, nothing beyond the correct subservience of an assistant stage-manager to a star. She answered him vaguely, that well-known gracious smile, and went on to the stage door, her heart pounding violently as though someone had sprung at her out of the dark.

In the car, she sat very still with her hands folded in her lap, vainly hoping that this very stillness, this stern outward quietness might help to empty her mind. Presently she gave up and watched herself carefully taking a cigarette out of her case and lighting it. "I am Diana Reed. *The* Diana Reed, lighting a cigarette. I am Diana Reed driving home in my expensive car to my expensive flat—I am tired after my performance and as I have a matinee to-morrow it is sane and sensible for me to go straight home to bed after the show. I am having supper with Jimmy to-morrow night and probably Friday night, too—there are hundreds of other nights and there is no reason whatsoever for me to feel lonely and agonised and without peace. I am Diana Reed—I am celebrated, successful, sought after—my play is a

hit—my notices were excellent—except the *Sunday Times*. I am Diana Reed, famous, nearing forty and desperate. I am in love, not perhaps really in love like I was with Tony, nor even Pierre Chabron, but that was different, because it lasted such a little time and was foreign and mixed up with being abroad and everything, but I am in love all right and it's different again, it's always different and always difficult, and I wish to God I could be happy with it and give up to it, but there's too much to remember and too much to be careful of and too many people wanting to find out about it and gossip and smear it with their dirty fingers."

She let down the window and flicked her cigarette on to the pavement. It fell at the feet of a man in a mackintosh and a bowler hat, he looked up quickly and she drew herself back guiltily into the corner of the car. When she let herself into her flat and switched on the lights in the sitting-room it's smug tidy emptiness seemed to jeer at her. It was a charming room. The furniture was good, plain and luxuriously simple in line. There was the small "Utrillo" that Tony had given her so many years ago—it had been in her flat in Cavendish Street for ages, and she had even taken it on tour with her. That sharp sunny little street with the pinkish-white walls and neat row of plane trees making shadows across the road. The only other picture in the room was a Marie Laurencin of a woman in a sort of turban. It was quite small and framed in glass. That she had bought herself a couple of years ago when she was in Paris with Barbara and

Nicky. Nicky said it looked like a very pale peach with currants in it.

She pitched her hat on to the sofa where it lay looking apologetic, almost cringing, and went over and opened the window. Outside it was very quiet, only dark roof tops and an occasional light here and there, but there was a glow in the sky over Oxford Street, and she could hear the noise of traffic far away muffled by the houses and squares in between. Just round the corner in George Street she heard a taxi stop, the slam of its door and the sharp ping as the driver shut off the meter. It might so easily be Jimmy, knowing that she was coming home alone, knowing how happy it would make her if he just came along for ten minutes to say good night. The taxi with a grind of its gears started up and drove away, she could hear it for quite a while until there was silence again. It might still be Jimmy, he wouldn't be so extravagant as to keep a taxi waiting—he might at this very moment be coming up in the lift. In a few seconds she would hear the lift doors opening and then the front-door bell. She listened, holding her breath. He might, of course, come up the stairs in order not to be seen by the lift man. Jimmy was nothing if not cautious. She waited, holding on to the window-sill tight to prevent herself from going to the front door. There was no sound, and presently her tension relaxed and, after rather a disdainful glance at herself in the glass over the mantelpiece, she went and opened the front door anyhow. The landing was deserted. When she came back into the

room again she discovered, to her great irritation, that she was trembling.

She sat on a chair by the door, bolt upright, like somebody in a dentist's waiting-room. It wouldn't have surprised her if a bright, professionally smiling nurse had suddenly appeared and announced that Doctor Martin was ready for her. Again she folded her hands in her lap. Someone had once told her that if you sat still as death with your hands relaxed, all the vitality ran out of the ends of your fingers and your nerves stopped being strained and tied up in knots. The frigidaire in the kitchen suddenly gave a little click and started whirring. She stared at various things in the room, as though by concentrating, identifying herself with them she could become part of them and not feel so alone. The pickled wood Steinway with a pile of highly-coloured American tunes on it; the low table in front of the fire with last week's *Sketch* and *Bystander*, and the week before last's *New Yorker*, symmetrically arranged with this morning's *Daily Telegraph* folded neatly on top; the Chinese horse on the mantelpiece, very aloof and graceful with its front hoof raised as though it were just about to stamp on something small and insignificant. Nicky had said it was "Ming" and Eileen had sworn it was "Sung" because she had once been to China on a cruise and became superior at the mention of anything remotely oriental.

There had been quite a scene about it culminating in Martha saying loudly that she'd settle for it being

"Gong" or "Pong" if only everybody would bloody well shut up arguing and give her a drink.

Diana remembered how Jimmy had laughed, he was sitting on the floor next to Barbara. She looked at the empty space in front of the fireplace and saw him clearly, laughing, with his head thrown back and the firelight shining on his hair. That was during rehearsals, before anything had happened, before the opening night in Manchester and the fatal supper party at the Midland, when he had come over from his party at the other end of the French restaurant to tell her about the rehearsal for cuts the next afternoon. She remembered asking him to sit down and have a glass of champagne, and how politely he had accepted with a rather quizzical smile, almost an air of resignation. Then the long discussion about Duse and Bernhardt, and Jonathan getting excited and banging the table, and Jimmy sitting exactly opposite her where she could watch him out of the corner of her eye, listening intently to the conversation and twiddling the stem of his wine-glass. They had all been dressed, of course. Jonathan and Mary had come up from London especially for the first night, also Violet and Dick and Maureen. Jimmy was wearing a grey flannel suit and a blue shirt and navy blue tie; occasionally the corners of his mouth twitched as though he were secretly amused, but didn't want to betray it. Then he had caught her looking at him, raised his eyebrows just for the fraction of a second and, with the most disarming friendliness, patted her hand. "You

gave a brilliant performance to-night," he said. "I felt very proud to be there." That was the moment. That was the spark being struck. If she had had any sense she'd have run like a stag, but instead of running, instead of recognising danger, there she had sat idiotically smiling, warmed and attracted. Not content with having had a successful first night and having given a good performance, not satisfied with the fact that her friends, her close intimate friends had trailed all the way from London to enjoy her triumph with her, she had had to reach out greedily for something more. Well, God knows she'd got it all right. Here it was, all the fun of the fair. The fruits of those few weeks of determined fascination. She remembered, with a slight shudder, how very much at her best she had been, how swiftly she had responded to her new audience, this nice-looking, physically attractive young man at least ten years younger than herself. How wittily she had joined in the general conversation. She remembered Jonathan laughing until he cried at the way she had described the dress rehearsal of *Lady from the East*, when the Japanese bridge had broken in the middle of her love scene. All the time, through all the laughter, through all the easy intimate jokes, she had had her eye on Jimmy, watching for his response, drawing him into the circle, appraising him, noting his slim wrists, the way he put his head on one side when he asked a question, his eyes, his thick eyelashes, his wide, square shoulders. She remembered saying "good night" to him with the others as they all

went up in the lift together. Her suite was on the second floor, so she got out first. He was up on the top floor somewhere, sharing a room with Bob Harley, one of the small part actors. She remembered, also, looking at herself in the glass in her bathroom and wondering, while she creamed her face, how attractive she was to him really, or how much of it was star glamour and position. Even then, so early in the business, she had begun to doubt. It was inevitable, of course, that doubt, particularly with someone younger than herself, more particularly still when that someone was assistant stage-manager and general understudy. A few days after that, she had boldly asked him to supper in her suite. She remembered at the time being inwardly horrified at such flagrant indiscretion; however, no one had found out or even suspected. He accepted with alacrity, arrived a little late, having had a bath and changed his suit, and that was that.

Suddenly, the telephone bell rang. Diana jumped, and with a sigh of indescribable relief, went into her bedroom to answer it. Nobody but Jimmy knew that she was coming home early—nobody else would dream of finding her in at this time of night. She sat on the edge of the bed just in order to let it ring once more, just to give herself time to control the foolish happiness in her voice. Then she lifted the receiver and said "Hallo," in exactly the right tone of politeness only slightly touched with irritation. She heard Martha's voice at the other end, and the suddenness of the disappointment robbed her of

all feeling for a moment. She sat there rigid and cold with a dead heart. "My God," Martha was saying, "you could knock me down with a crowbar, I couldn't be more surprised. I rang up Jonathan and Barbara and Nicky, and finally the Savoy Grill—this is only a forlorn hope—I never thought for a moment you'd be in." Diana muttered something about being tired and having a matinee to-morrow, her voice sounded false and toneless. Martha went on. "I don't want to be a bore, darling, but Helen and Jack have arrived from New York, and they're leaving on Saturday for Paris, and they've been trying all day to get seats for your show, and the nearest they could get was the fourteenth row, and I wondered if you could do anything about the house seats." With a great effort Diana said: "Of course, darling, I'll fix it with the box-office to-morrow." "You're an angel—here are Helen and Jack, they want to say Hullo'." There was a slight pause, then Helen's husky Southern voice: "Darling——"

Diana put her feet up and lay back on the bed, this was going to be a long business. She was in command of herself again, she had been a fool to imagine it was Jimmy, anyhow; he never telephoned unless she asked him to, that was one of the most maddening aspects of his good behaviour. Good behaviour to Jimmy was almost a religion. Excepting when they were alone together, he never for an instant betrayed by the flicker of an eyelash that they were anything more than casual acquaintances. There was no servility in his manner, no pandering to

her stardom. On the contrary the brief words he had occasion to speak to her in public were, if anything, a trifle brusque, perfectly polite, of course, but definitely without warmth. Helen's voice went on. She and Jack had had a terrible trip on the *Queen Mary*, and Jack had been sick as a dog for three whole days. Presently Jack came to the telephone and took up the conversation where Helen had left off. Diana lay still, giving a confident, assured performance, laughing gaily, dismissing her present success with just enough disarming professional modesty to be becoming. "But, Jack dear, it's a marvellous part—nobody could go far wrong in a part like that. You wait until you see it—you'll see exactly what I mean. Not only that, but the cast's good too, Ronnie's superb. I think it's the best performance he's given since *The Lights Are Low*, and, of course, he's heaven to play with. He does a little bit of business with the breakfast-tray at the beginning of the third act that's absolutely magical. I won't tell you what it is, because it would spoil it for you, but just watch out for it—— No dear, I can't have supper to-morrow night—I've a date with some drearies that I've already put off twice—no, really I couldn't again—how about lunch on Friday? You'd better come here and bring old Martha, too—all right—it's lovely to hear your voice again. The seats will be in your name in the box-office to-morrow night. Come back-stage afterwards, anyhow, even if you've hated it—good-bye!"

Diana put down the telephone and lit a cigarette,

then she wrote on the pad by the bed: "Reminder fix house seats, Jack and Helen." Next to the writing-pad was a thermos jug of ovaltine left for her by Dora. She looked at it irritably and then poured some out and sipped it.

Jimmy had probably gone straight home. He generally did. He wasn't a great one for going out, and didn't seem to have many friends except, of course, Elsie Lumley, who'd been in repertory with him, but that was all over now and she was safely married, or was she? Elsie Lumley, judging from what she knew of her, was the type that would be reluctant to let any old love die, married or not married. Elsie Lumley! Pretty, perhaps rather over-vivacious, certainly talented. She'd be a star in a year or two if she behaved herself. The picture of Elsie and Jimmy together was unbearable—even though it all happened years ago—it *had* happened and had gone on for quite a long while, too. Elsie lying in his arms, pulling his head down to her mouth, running her fingers through his hair—— Diana put down the cup of Ovaltine with a bang that spilt a lot of it into the saucer. She felt sick, as though something were dragging her heart down into her stomach. If Jimmy had gone straight home he'd be in his flat now, in bed probably, reading. There really wasn't any valid reason in the world why she shouldn't ring him up. If he didn't answer, he was out, and there was nothing else to do about it. If he was in, even if he had dropped off to sleep, he wouldn't really mind her just ringing up to say "Good night."

She put out her hand to dial his number, then withdrew it again. It would be awful if someone else was there and answered the telephone, not that it was very likely, he only had a bed-sitting room, but still he might have asked Bob Harley or Walter Grayson home for a drink. If Walter Grayson heard her voice on the telephone it would be all over the theatre by to-morrow evening. He was one of those born theatrical gossips, amusing certainly, and quite a good actor, but definitely dangerous. She could, of course, disguise her voice. Just that twang of refined cockney that she had used in *The Short Year*. She put out her hand again, and again withdrew it. "I'll have another cigarette and by the time I've smoked it, I shall decide whether to ring him up or not." She hoisted herself up on the pillow and lit a cigarette, methodically and with pleasure. The ache had left her heart and she felt happier—unaccountably so, really; nothing had happened except the possibility of action, of lifting the receiver and dialling a number, of hearing his voice—rather sleepy, probably—saying: "Hallo, who is it?" She puffed at her cigarette luxuriously watching the smoke curl up into the air. It was blue when it spiralled up from the end of the cigarette and grey when she blew it out of her mouth. It might, of course, irritate him being rung up, he might think she was being indiscreet or tiresome or even trying to check up on him: trying to find out whether he'd gone straight home, and whether he was alone or not.

How horrible if she rang up and he wasn't alone: if

she heard his voice say, just as he was lifting the receiver: "Don't move, darling, it's probably a wrong number," something ordinary like that, so simple and so ordinary, implying everything, giving the whole game away. After all, he was young and good-looking, and they had neither of them vowed any vows of fidelity. It really wouldn't be so surprising if he indulged in a little fun on the side every now and then. Conducting a secret liaison with the star of the theatre in which you work, must be a bit of a strain from time to time. A little undemanding, light, casual love with somebody else might be a relief.

Diana crushed out her cigarette angrily, her hands were shaking and she felt sick again. She swung her legs off the bed and, sitting on the edge of it, dialled his number viciously, as though she had found him out already; caught him red-handed. She listened to the ringing tone, it rang in twos—brrr-brrr—brrr-brrr. The telephone was next to his bed, that she knew, because once when she had dropped him home he had asked her in to see his hovel. It was a bed-sitting-room on the ground floor in one of those small, old-fashioned streets that run down to the river from John Street, Adelphi . . . brr-brr—brr-brrr—she might have dialled the wrong number. She hung up and then re-dialled it, again the ringing tone, depressing and monotonous. He was out—he was out somewhere—but where could he possibly be? One more chance, she'd call the operator and ask her to give the number a special ring, just in case there had been a mistake.

The operator was most obliging, but after a few minutes her voice, detached and impersonal, announced that there was no reply from the number and that should she call again later? Diana said no, it didn't matter, she'd call in the morning. She replaced the receiver slowly, wearily, as though it were too heavy to hold any longer, then she buried her face in her hands.

Presently she got up again and began to walk up and down the room. The bed, rumpled where she had lain on it, but turned down, with her nightdress laid out, ready to get into, tortured her with the thought of the hours she would lie awake in it. Even medinal, if she were stupid enough to take a couple of tablets before a matinée, wouldn't be any use to-night. That was what was so wonderful about being in love, it made you so happy! She laughed bitterly aloud and then caught herself laughing bitterly aloud and, just for a second, really laughed. Just a grain of humour left after all. She stopped in front of a long glass and addressed herself in a whisper, but with clear, precise enunciation as though she were trying to explain something to an idiot child. "I don't care," she said, "I don't care if it's cheap or humiliating or unwise or undignified or mad, I'm going to do it, so there. I'm going to do it now, and if I have to wait all night in the street I shall see him, do you understand? I shall see him before I go to sleep, I don't mind if it's only for a moment, I shall see him. If the play closes to-morrow night. If I'm the scandal of London. If the stars fall out of the sky. If the world

comes to an end! I shall see him before I go to sleep to-night. If he's alone or with somebody else. If he's drunk, sober or doped, I intend to see him. If he is in and his lights are out I shall bang on the window until I wake him and if, when I wake him, he's in bed with man, woman or child, I shall at least know. Beyond arguments and excuses I shall *know*. I don't care how foolish and neurotic I may appear to him. I don't care how high my position is, or how much I trail my pride in the dust. What's position anyway, and what's pride? To hell with them. I'm in love and I'm desperately unhappy. I know there's no reason to be unhappy, no cause for jealousy and that I should be ashamed of myself at my age, or at any age, for being so uncontrolled and for allowing this God-damned passion or obsession or whatever it is to conquer me, but there it is. It can't be helped. No more fighting—no more efforts to behave beautifully. I'm going to see him—I'm going now—and if he is unkind or angry and turns away from me I shall lie down in the gutter and howl."

She picked up her hat from the sofa in the sitting-room, turned out all the lights, glanced in her bag to see if she had her keys all right and enough money for a taxi, and went out on to the landing, shutting the door furtively behind her. She debated for a moment whether to ring for the lift or slip down the stairs, finally deciding on the latter as it would be better on the whole if the lift man didn't see her. He lived in the basement and there was little chance of him catching her unless by bad luck

she happened to coincide with any of the other tenants coming in. She got out into the street unobserved and set off briskly in the direction of Orchard Street. It was a fine night, fortunately, but there had been rain earlier on and the roads were shining under the lights. She waited on the corner of Orchard Street and Portman Square for a taxi that came lolling towards her from the direction of Great Cumberland Place. She told the driver to stop just opposite the Little Theatre in John Street, Adelphi, and got in. The cab smelt musty and someone had been smoking a pipe in it. On the seat beside her, something white caught her eye; she turned it over gingerly with her gloved hand, and discovered that it was a programme of her own play, with a large photograph of herself on the cover. She looked at the photograph critically. The cab was rattling along Oxford Street now, and the light was bright enough. The photograph had been taken a year ago in a Molyneux sports dress and small hat. It was a three-quarter length and she was sitting on the edge of a sofa, her profile half turned away from the camera. She looked young in it, although the poise of the head was assured, perhaps a trifle too assured. She looked a little hard too, she thought, a little ruthless. She wondered if she was, really. If this journey she was making now, this unwise, neurotic excursion, merely boiled down to being an unregenerate determination to get what she wanted, when she wanted it, at no matter what price. She thought it over calmly, this business of being determined. After all, it was largely that, plus undoubted

talent and personality, that got her where she was to-day. She wondered if she were popular in the theatre. She knew the stage-hands liked her, of course, they were easy; just remembering to say "thank you," when any of them held open a door for her or "good evening," when she passed them on the stage was enough—they were certainly easy because their manners were good, and so were hers; but the rest of the company—not Ronnie, naturally, he was in more or less the same position as herself; the others, little Cynthia French, for instance, the ingenue, did she hate her bitterly in secret? Did she envy her and wish her to fail? Was all that wide-eyed, faintly servile eagerness to please, merely masking an implacable ambition, a sweet, strong, female loathing? She thought not on the whole, Cynthia was far too timid a creature, unless, of course, she was a considerably finer actress off the stage than she was on. Walter Grayson, she knew, liked her all right. She'd known him for years, they'd been in several plays together. Lottie Carnegie was certainly waspish at moments, but only with that innate defensiveness of an elderly actress who hadn't quite achieved what she originally set out to achieve. There were several of them about, old-timers without any longer much hope left of becoming stars, but with enough successful work behind them to assure their getting good character parts. They all had their little mannerisms and peculiarities and private fortresses of pride. Lottie was all right really, in fact as far as she, Diana, was concerned she was all sweetness and light,

but, of course, that might be because she hated Ronnie. Once, years ago apparently, he had been instrumental in having her turned down for a part for which he considered her unsuitable. The others liked her well enough, she thought, at least she hoped they did; it was horrid not to be liked; but she hadn't any illusions as to what would happen if she made a false step. This affair with Jimmy, for example. If that became known in the theatre the whole of London would be buzzing with it. She winced at the thought. That would be horrible. Once more, by the light of a street lamp at the bottom of the Haymarket, she looked at the photograph. She wondered if she had looked like that to the man with the pipe to whom the programme had belonged; whether he had taken his wife with him or his mistress; whether they'd liked the play and cried dutifully in the last act, or been bored and disappointed and wished they'd gone to a musical comedy. How surprised they'd be if they knew that the next person to step into the taxi after they'd left it was Diana Reed, Diana Reed herself, the same woman they had so recently been applauding, as she bowed and smiled at them in that shimmering silver evening gown—that reminded her to tell Dora at the matinée to-morrow that the paillettes where her cloak fastened were getting tarnished and that she must either ring up the shop or see if Mrs. Blake could deal with it in the wardrobe.

The taxi drew up with a jerk opposite to the Little Theatre. Diana got out and paid the driver. He said: "Good night, Miss," and drove away down the hill,

leaving her on the edge of the kerb feeling rather dazed, almost forgetting what she was there for. The urgency that had propelled her out of her flat and into that taxi seemed to have evaporated somewhere between Oxford street and here. Perhaps it was the photograph on the programme, the reminder of herself as others saw her, as she should be, poised and well-dressed with head held high, not in contempt, nothing supercilious about it, but secure and dignified, above the arena. Those people who had taken that taxi, who had been to the play—how shocked they'd be if they could see her now, not just standing alone in a dark street, that wouldn't of course shock them particularly, merely surprise them; but if they could know, by some horrid clairvoyance, why she was here. If, just for an instant, they could see into her mind. Diana Reed, that smooth, gracious creature whose stage loves and joys and sorrows they had so often enjoyed, furtively loitering about in the middle of the night in the hope of spending a few minutes with a comparatively insignificant young man whom she liked going to bed with. Diana resolutely turned in the opposite direction from Jimmy's street and walked round by the side of the Tivoli into the Strand. Surely it was a little more than that? Surely she was being unnecessarily hard on herself. There was a sweetness about Jimmy, a quality, apart from his damned sex appeal. To begin with, he was well-bred, a gentleman. (What a weak, nauseating alibi, as though that could possibly matter one way or the other and yet, of course,

it did.) His very gentleness, his strict code of behaviour. His fear, so much stronger even than hers, that anyone should discover their secret. Also he was intelligent, infinitely more knowledgeable and better read than she. All that surely made a difference, surely justified her behaviour a little bit? She walked along the Strand towards Fleet Street, as though she were hurrying to keep an important appointment. There were still a lot of people about and on the other side of the street two drunken men were happily staggering along with their arms round each other's necks, singing "Ramona." Suddenly to her horror she saw Violet Cassel and Donald Ross approaching her, they had obviously been supping at the Savoy and decided to walk a little before taking a cab. With an instinctive gesture she jammed her hat down over her eyes and darted into Heppell's, so quickly that she collided with a woman who was just coming out and nearly knocked her down. The woman said, "Christ, a fugitive from a chain gang?" and waving aside Diana's apologies, went unsteadily into the street. Diana, faced with the enquiring stare of the man behind the counter and slightly unhinged by her encounter in the doorway, and the fact that Donald and Violet were at that moment passing the shop, racked her brains for something to buy. Her eyes lighted on a bottle of emerald green liquid labelled "Ess Viotto for the hands". "I should like that," she said, pointing to it. The man, without looking at her again, wrapped it up and handed it to her. She paid for it and went out of

of the shop. Violet and Donald were crossing over further down. She walked slowly back the way she had come. An empty taxi cruising along close to the kerb passed her and almost stopped. She hailed it, gave the driver her address, got in and sank thankfully back on to the seat. "A fugitive from a chain gang." She smiled and closed her eyes for a moment. "What an escape!" She felt utterly exhausted as if he had passed through a tremendous crisis, she was safe, safe as houses, safe from herself and humiliation and indignity. No more of such foolishness. She wondered whether or not she had replaced the stopper in the thermos. She hoped she had, because the prospect of sitting up, snug in bed, with a mind at peace and a cup of Ovaltine seemed heavenly. She opened her eyes as the taxi was turning into Lower Regent Street and looked out of the window. A man in a camel-hair coat and a soft brown hat was waiting on the corner to cross the road. Jimmy! She leant forward hurriedly and tried to slide the glass window back in order to tell the driver to stop, but it wouldn't budge. She rapped on the glass violently. The driver looked round in surprise and drew into the kerb. She was out on the pavement in a second, fumbling in her bag. "I've forgotten something," she said breathlessly. "Here"— she gave him a half a crown and turned and ran towards Jimmy. He had crossed over by now and was just turning into Cockspur Street. She had to wait a moment before crossing because two cars came by and then a bus. When she got round the corner she could still see

him just passing the lower entrance to the Carlton. She put on a great spurt and caught up with him just as he was about to cross the Haymarket. He turned his head slightly just as she was about to clutch at his sleeve. He was a pleasant-looking young man with fair hair and a little moustache. Diana stopped dead in her tracks and watched him cross the road, a stream of traffic went by and he was lost to view. She stood there trying to get her breath and controlling an overpowering desire to burst into tears. She stamped her foot hard as though by so doing she could crush her agonising, bitter disappointment into the ground.

A passing policeman looked at her suspiciously, so she moved miserably across the road and walked on towards Trafalgar Square, past the windows of the shipping agencies filled with smooth models of ocean liners. She stopped at one of them for a moment and rested her forehead against the cold glass, staring at a white steamer with two yellow funnels; its decks meticulously scrubbed and its paintwork shining in the light from the street lamps. Then, pulling herself together, she set off firmly in the direction of the Adelphi. No use dithering about any more. She had, in leaving the flat in the first place, obeyed an irresistible, but perfectly understandable impulse to see Jimmy. Since then, she had hesitated and vacillated and tormented herself into a state bordering on hysteria. No more of that, it was stupid, worse than stupid, this nerve-racking conflict between reason and emotion was insane. Reason had

done its best and failed. No reason in the world could now woo her into going back to that empty flat without seeing Jimmy. Fate had ranged itself against reason. If Fate hadn't dressed that idiotic young man with a moustache in Jimmy's camel-hair coat and Jimmy's hat, all would have been well. If Fate had arbitrarily decided, as it apparently had, that she was to make a fool herself, then make a fool of herself she would. Jimmy was probably fast asleep by now and would be furious at being awakened. She was, very possibly, by this lamentable, silly behaviour, about to wreck something precious, something which, in future years, she might have been able to look back upon with a certain wistful nostalgia. Now of course, after she had observed Jimmy's irritation and thinly-veiled disgust, after he had kissed her and comforted her and packed her off home in a taxi, she would have to face one fact clearly and bravely and that fact would be that a love affair, just another love affair, was ended. Not a violent break or a quarrel or anything like that, just a gentle, painful decline, something to be glossed over and forgotten. By the time she had reached the top of Jimmy's street there were tears in her eyes.

She walked along the pavement on tip-toe. His windows were dark, she peered into them over the area railings. His curtains were not drawn, his room was empty. She walked over the road to where there was a street lamp and looked at her wrist-watch. Ten past two. She stood there leaning against a railing, not far from the lamp, for several minutes. There were no lights in

any of the houses except one on the corner. On the top floor, a little square of yellow blind with a shadow occasionally moving behind it. On her left, beyond the end of the road which was a cul-de-sac, were the trees of the gardens along the embankment; they rustled slightly in the damp breeze. Now and then she heard the noise of a train rumbling hollowly over Charing Cross bridge, and occasionally the mournful hoot of a tug on the river. Where on earth could he be at this hour of the morning? He hated going out, or at least so he always said. He didn't drink much either. He wouldn't be sitting up with a lot of cronies just drinking. He was very responsible about his job too and in addition to a matinée to-morrow there was an understudy rehearsal at eleven—she knew that because she had happened to notice it on the board. He couldn't have gone home to his parents; they lived on the Isle of Wight. She sauntered slowly up to the corner of John Street and looked up and down it. No taxi in sight, nothing, only a cat stalking along by the railings. She stooped down and said "Puss, puss" to it but it ignored her and disappeared down some steps. Suddenly a taxi turned into the lower end of the street. Diana took to her heels and ran. Supposing it were Jimmy coming home with somebody—supposing he looked out and saw her standing on the pavement, watching him. Panic seized her. On the left, on the opposite side of the road from the house where he lived, was a dark archway. She dived into it and pressed herself flat against the wall. The taxi turned

into the street and drew up. She peeped round the corner and saw a fat man and a woman in evening dress get out of it and let themselves into one of the houses. When the taxi had backed and driven away she emerged from the archway. "I'll walk," she said to herself out loud. "I'll walk up and down this street twenty times and if he hasn't come by then I'll—I'll walk up and down it another twenty times." She started walking and laughing at herself at the same time, quite genuine laughter; she listened to it and it didn't sound in the least hysterical. I'm feeling better, she thought, none of it matters nearly as much as I think it does, I've been making mountains out of molehills. I'm enjoying this really, it's an adventure. There's something strange and exciting in being out alone in the city at dead of night, I must do it more often. She laughed again at the picture of herself solemnly setting out two or three times a week on solitary nocturnal jaunts. After about the fifteenth time she had turned and retraced her steps she met Jimmy face to face at the corner. He stopped in amazement and said, "My God—Diana—what on earth——"

She held out to him the parcel she'd been holding.

"I've brought you a present," she said with a little giggle. "It's Ess Viotto—for the hands!"

The Kindness of Mrs. Radcliffe

I

MRS. RADCLIFFE always awoke on the dot of half-past seven. It was a habit of years and from this regularity she derived a certain pride. It signified a disciplined mind in a disciplined body, and Mrs. Radcliffe was a great one for discipline. Life was a business that had to be handled with efficiency and despatch otherwise where were you? She had a poor opinion of those, and alas there were all too many of them, who allowed themselves to be swayed this way and that by emotions and circumstances over which they had little or no control. To have little of no control over emotions and circumstances was, to Mrs. Radcliffe, anathema. Not only did she consider it was foolish to succumb to the manifold weaknesses inherent in our natures, and after all there are many of these in even the sternest of us, it was downright dangerous. Mrs. Radcliffe could quote several instances of people of her acquaintance, occasionally even relatives, who, owing either to self-indulgence, lack of sense of responsibility or, in some cases, wilful stubbornness—such as Cousin Laura for example—had completely degenerated and

failed. It must not be imagined that Mrs. Radcliffe, who heaven knows was a broad-minded and kindly woman, referred to failure merely in the worldly sense; many of those who from her point of view had "Failed" had, on basely materialistic counts, done exceedingly well for themselves. Failure was a hydra-headed monster. You could be shrewd and business-like, marry well and become a senior partner in no time and still fail. You could bear children, bring them up firmly, embark them on promising careers, keep your figure, wear smart clothes and play Bridge as well as Mrs. Poindexter and still fail. On the other hand you could be poor and of no account, an insignificant cog in the great wheel of life and succeed, succeed triumphantly, for surely success in the eyes of God is of more ultimate importance than the glittering transient satisfaction of success in the eyes of the world. This, to sum it up briefly, was Mrs. Radcliffe's philosophy and she was delighted with it. She felt herself to be on a footing with the Almighty which was, to say the least of it, cordial. She referred to Him frequently in her mind and even more frequently in her conversation, not, it must be understood, with the slightest trace of sanctimoniousness. Hers was far too healthy and sane a character for that; rather more in a spirit of reverend friendliness. Occasionally she even blasphemed mildly to the extent of saying "Good Lord" or "My God" in moments of light stress. This, she considered in her secret heart, to be rather amusingly racy provided she didn't allow it to become a habit.

On this particular morning in early April Mrs. Radcliffe awoke as usual and lay for a few moments in dreamy awareness of the comfort of her bed, the translucent greenish charm of her bedroom, and the fact that it was a sunny day. This was apparent from the bars of strong light shining through the venetian blind and making stripes on the corner of the dressing-table and the chaise-longue by the window. Presently she heard Mildred approaching with her early tea; a swift glance at the clock on the table by her bed informed her that Mildred was four and a half minutes late. She decided, however, not to mention it this time. Mildred's unpunctuality was, unfortunately, the least of her defects; in fact there were moments when Mrs. Radcliffe genuinely regretted her generous impulse in taking her from the orphanage when she might quite easily have found a girl from the Registry Office with a certain amount of previous training in domestic service. The training of Mildred presented many problems and showed every sign of being an uphill struggle. But still Mrs. Radcliffe in her capacity as one of the esteemed Vice-Presidents of the Orphanage Committee had felt it her bounden duty to set an example to some of the other members, who, although volubly free with suggestions for the future of their charges when the moment came to launch them on to the world, were singularly unresponsive when it came to the point of doing anything practical about it themselves. Mrs. Radcliffe often smiled whimsically as she recalled the various expressions on the faces of the

committee when she had burst her bombshell. "I will take Mildred myself," she had said, quite simply, without undue emphasis on the magnanimity of her gesture; just like that, "I will take Mildred myself!" She remembered that Mrs. Weecock, who was over-emotional and effusive, had risen impulsively and kissed her, and that Doctor Price had immediately proposed a vote of thanks which had been carried unanimously with the greatest enthusiasm.

Mildred, after several months of strenuous effort, had, as yet, only managed to scrape the surface of what was ultimately expected of her; however she was willing, sometimes almost too eager to please, all of which was natural enough, poor little thing; nobody could accuse Mrs. Radcliffe of being unable to recognise pathetic, overwhelming gratitude, however nervous.

At this moment the object of her reflections entered the room. She was an uncouth girl of eighteen. Her abundant sandy hair straggled widely away from her neat cap, giving it the appearance of a small white fort set in the middle of a desert. Her hands were large and pink and her feet, encased in cotton stockings and strap shoes, were larger still. Her face, however, apart from a few freckles, was pleasing. She had a generous mouth and well-set greyish-green eyes. She said "Good morning, 'um," in a breathy voice and, having deposited the tray temporarily on the chest-of-drawers, went over and pulled up the blind. She also closed the window, which during Mrs. Radcliffe's slumbers had been open a fraction

at the top, rather too sharply, so that the panes rattled.

"Gently, Mildred, gently," said Mrs. Radcliffe as she hoisted herself up on her pillows preparatory to receiving the tea-tray. Mildred, by drawing in her breath and then clicking her tongue against her teeth several times, made a noise which, although intended to express bitter self-reproach, merely succeeded in being irritating. Mrs. Radcliffe winced and waited for her tray in silence. The tray was a complicated affair designed for the comfort of invalids. By pressing lightly with the hands, two pairs of wooden legs shot out from each side thereby forming a neat little bridge across the patient's knees. This was one of the banes of Mildred's life. If the eiderdown were rumpled or Mrs. Radcliffe had not arranged herself in a completely symmetrical position, the whole thing was liable to tip sideways causing everything on it to slide alarmingly and hover on the brink of disaster. This morning, aware that she had transgressed over the window shutting, Mildred was even more nervous than usual. Her large hands were trembling and she breathed heavily. She set the tray across Mrs. Radcliffe's legs with laborious care; so far so good, only a few drops slopped out of the milk jug. She straightened herself with a sigh of relief and in that moment of triumph God struck her down. The corner of her apron unbeknownst to her, had been caught by the left legs of the tray and the straightening of her body jerked it free with just sufficient force to over-balance the tea-pot. It was one of those moments in life when Time ceases to exist, years of fear

and agony are endured in the passing of a brief instant. Mildred watched, with dilating eyes, the fat blue tea-pot with the willow-pattern design on it wobble from side to side and then slowly, slowly, with the slowness of protracted death, fall off the tray, roll over twice on the smooth slope of the counterpane, shedding its lid on the way, and finally crash to the floor, emptying its contents with devilish exultance into Mrs. Radcliffe's ostrich feather bedroom slippers. In the deadly silence that ensued a train whistled in the cutting a mile away, causing Mildred to jump violently as though the last trump had sounded for her.

Mrs. Radcliffe, who as a rule could be relied upon to assume an attitude of splendid calm in any crisis, for once lost control and fairly let fly. Mildred stood before her wretchedly twisting her hands, dumb with misery, too frightened even to take in half of what was being said to her. Disjointed words flashed across her consciousness like those moving electric light signs which tell of immediate events but which, if your attention is not wholly concentrated on them, become a series of meaningless phrases. A few invectives like "Idiot," "Fool," "Clumsy" and "Stupid" seared her mind for a moment and then were gone with the rest, leaving her shivering in a void of hopelessness and shame.

Presently Mrs. Radcliffe regained control and, after a slight pause, spoke with icy precision: "Pick it up," she said, and then again: "PICK IT UP!" using each word as a sword. Mildred stooped and picked up the tea-pot

and stood with it in her hands, only vaguely aware of its heat. "The tray," said Mrs. Radcliffe. "Take the tray." Mildred put the tea-pot down on the floor again and took the tray.

The next ten minutes was devoted, in so far as was possible, to restoring order to chaos. Mildred, galvanised suddenly into feverish activity, flew down to the kitchen, blurted out the disaster in a few stumbling words to Cook, flew upstairs again with a cloth, rubbed and scrubbed with hot water out of the silver-plated jug to erase the tea-stains from the carpet amid a hail of frigidly patient directions from her mistress. Finally, when the best that could be done had been done, she blurted out, "I'm sure I'm very sorry, 'um, it was an accident," and made for the door. Mrs. Radcliffe halted her.

"Just a moment, Mildred."

Mildred waited, standing first on one foot then on the other. Mrs. Radcliffe's voice was cold and just, she was now in full command again and sailing to victory.

"To explain that it was an accident, Mildred," she said, "was unnecessary. I should hardly have imagined that you had done such a thing on purpose. But what I wish to point out to you is that the accident would never have occurred if you had not been both careless and slovenly. I have spoken to you, Heaven knows often enough, about your clumsiness, and if you don't try to improve I very much fear I shall have to give you your notice. This time, however, and it is the last time, I shall excuse you." Mildred's heart leapt with relief like a bird in her

breast. "But," continued Mrs. Radcliffe, "in order that this shall be a lesson to you, in order that you shall think and be more careful in future, I intend to punish you." There was a slight pause. The small gilt clock on the mantelpiece gave a little whirr and struck eight. Mrs. Radcliffe waited portentously until it had finished. "I understand that to-day is your afternoon out?" The bird in Mildred's breast dropped like a stone to the earth and through the earth into deep caverns of despair. "Yes, 'um," she said huskily. "Well," went on the voice of doom, "you will stay in this afternoon and help with the silver. That is all, thank you." A tear coursed down the side of Mildred's nose. "Very good, 'um," she said in a voice so low as to be almost unaudible, and went out of the room.

The fact that every minute of every hour of every day of Mildred's week had been concentrated on the anticipatory bliss of that afternoon out was of course hidden from Mrs. Radcliffe. How could she possibly know that Fred, thrilling wonderful Fred, assistant to Mr. Lewis the chemist in the High Street, had arranged to meet Mildred at two-thirty outside Harvey Brown's and take her to see Spencer Tracey, Clark Gable and Myrna Loy in *Test Pilot?* How could she possibly know that Messrs. Tracey and Gable and Miss Loy would be up and away by next Thursday and their sacred screen occupied by an English historical picture featuring Sir Cedric Hardwicke? How also could she guess that as Fred would be out on his rounds all the morning there was no possible way of letting him know that Mildred would be unable

to meet him and that, after waiting for a half-an-hour or so on the pavement outside Harvey Brown's, he would probably be so furious that he would never speak to her again?

Fortunately for Mrs. Radcliffe's peace of mind she was ignorant of all this and in consequence, her sense of exhilaration at having handled a difficult and annoying domestic drama with her usual consummate calm and decision, was in no way impaired.

2

Mr. Stanley Radcliffe stood five foot six inches and a half in his socks which, no matter with what fickleness the weather might change, were invariably of austere grey worsted. His hair, thin on the top but happily bushy at the sides, was of the same colour as his socks. As a character he was amiable, temperate and industrious but, if criticise we must, a trifle lacking in spirit. This defect, however, could be understood, if not altogether excused, by the fact that he had been married to Mrs. Radcliffe for thirty-three years. It is a well-known sociological truism that two dominant personalities become ill-at-ease when compelled by force of circumstance to inhabit the same house for a long period of time. It is possible that Mr. Radcliffe wisely realised this early on in his married life and, being a man of peaceful and sensible disposition, relinquished the ever dubious joys

of domestic authority to his wife. It must not be supposed, however, that outside his home he was anywhere near as weak as he was in it. On the contrary, in his office—he was a partner in the firm of Eldridge, Eldridge and Black, Solicitors-at-Law—in his office he was often a veritable martinet. Times out of number Miss Hallett, his secretary, would emerge from taking the morning letters with pursed lips and a spread of scarlet stretching from her neck up to her ears that spoke volumes.

On the morning of the tea-pot tragedy he was feeling cheerful. It was a cheerful day. The birds were twittering in the garden. He had received a letter from Henry Boulder, a more or less private client, that is to say a client who combined the transaction of legal business with a pleasant personal relationship, inviting him to visit him that afternoon at his house near Bromley to discuss the details of a new building contract that Eldridge, Eldridge and Black were drawing up for him, and perhaps play a round of golf afterwards. A game of golf to Stanley Radcliffe was as steel is to a magnet, or rather a magnet to steel. He loved golf deeply and truly with all the passion of his nature. He was also fond of Mrs. Boulder, not in any way lasciviously, Mr. Radcliffe's sex impulses had atrophied from neglect at least fifteen years ago, but with a warm sense of comradeship. She was a gay, vivacious creature in the early forties, given to telling rather risqué stories, and she had a loud, infectious laugh. Life at the Boulders' home seemed to consist of one long joke. Henry Boulder laughed a lot

too, and frequently said the most outrageous things, but with such an air of worldly geniality that no offence could possibly be taken.

Mr. Radcliffe looked at his wife sipping her coffee and opening letters at the other side of the table. She had her glasses on and appeared to be in a tranquil mood. He wondered if the moment was at last ripe for him to suggest what he had been longing to suggest for weeks. Why not take the plunge? He cleared his throat. Mrs. Radcliffe looked up. "Such a nice letter from Mrs. Riddle," she said. "They've just come back from a cruise to the Holy Land."

A fleeting vision of Mrs. Riddle, a formidable woman of vicious piety, blustering through the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, flashed across Mr. Radcliffe's mind for a moment and was obliterated. Now or never.

"How nice, dear," he said. "I wanted to——"

"They bathed in the Dead Sea," went on Mrs. Radcliffe, glancing at a closely written page of thin notepaper. "And it was so salt that they couldn't sink."

"I shouldn't have thought," said Mr. Radcliffe with a bold chuckle, "that they would have wished to."

Mrs. Radcliffe looked at him suspiciously and then smiled, but without mirth, and went on reading the letter. Humour was not her strong suit and flippancy definitely irritated her.

Mr. Radcliffe, realising that he had made a tactical error, cleared his throat again. "Adela," he said, "I have just had a letter from Henry Boulder." This, he realised

the moment the words were out of his mouth, was another tactical error implying as it did that a letter from Henry Boulder was on a par with a letter from Mrs. Riddle. Mrs. Radcliffe ignored him completely and went on reading. Then Mr. Radcliffe, in a determined effort to get what was in his mind out of it, committed the gravest blunder of all. He advanced recklessly into the open. "I thought of inviting the Boulders to dinner to-night," he said.

Mrs. Radcliffe slowly lowered her letter and stared at him. If he had suggested inviting two naked Zulus to dinner she could not have expressed more shocked surprise. "My dear Stanley!" she said in the exasperated tone one might use in addressing a particularly fractious invalid. "The Dukes are coming."

"I don't see that that would make any difference," he said suddenly.

Mrs. Radcliffe, scenting mutiny, decided to scotch it once and for all. She leant across the table and smiled. "I fully appreciate," she said, "that they are great friends of yours," the emphasis on the word "yours" implied just enough subtle contempt, "but they are certainly not great friends of mine, in fact I barely know them. Also, my dear, although I am sure they are very useful to you in business, they are hardly"—here she gave a little laugh—"hardly the sort of people I would invite to meet the Dukes!"

Mr. Radcliffe opened his mouth to speak, to speak sharply, to say with firmness and conviction that the Reverend Francis Duke, vicar or no vicar, was an over-

bearing, pretentious bore, and his wife a giggling fool, and that for good humour and pleasant company and making a dinner-party a success Mr. and Mrs. Henry Boulder could knock spots off them any day of the week. All this and more was bubbling in his mind, clamouring to be said, but the habit of years was too strong for him. He met the unwinking stare of his wife's slightly protuberant blue eyes for a moment and then wavered, the game was up. "Very well, my dear," he said, and resumed his toast and marmalade. Mrs. Radcliffe relaxed and smiled indulgently, poor old Stanley! She, who was so used to triumph, could afford to be magnanimous. She leant across the table and patted his hand affectionately then, generously wiping the episode from her mind, she embarked on the fourth page of Mrs. Riddle's letter about the Holy Land.

Mr. Radcliffe, a half-an-hour later, sat in the corner of a third-class smoking compartment on the train to London puzzling out in his mind the most tactful way in which he could repay some of the Boulders' hospitality. He could, of course, invite them to dine at a restaurant and perhaps get seats for a play afterwards, but even so he was terribly afraid that the absence of Adela and the fact that they had never been asked to the house might hurt their feelings. People were extremely touchy about things like that. The last time he had visited them Mrs. Boulder had dropped a few hints. Suddenly, with a rush of blood to his face, he remembered that that same evening, just after dinner,

he had, in a moment of expansion, definitely invited them. He remembered his very words: "You must come and dine one night soon and we'll have some Bridge—my wife is so anxious to get to know you better."

When the train arrived at Cannon Street he went straight to the telegraph office, walking slowly as if he were tired. He wrote out the telegram carefully. "Boulder, 'The Nook,' Bromley. Very disappointed unable accept your kind invitation for this afternoon regards Radcliffe."

3

Mrs. Radcliffe rose from her desk in the morning-room with a sigh and patted her hair in front of a mirror on the wall. She had been absent-mindedly disarranging it while writing that difficult letter to Cousin Laura. She looked at her reflection for a moment and then, smiling, shook her head sorrowfully at herself. "You must really break yourself of that bad habit," she said with mock firmness, and then looked hurriedly to see if Mildred had happened to come in without her noticing. It would be too ridiculous to be caught by a servant talking to oneself. All was well, however. Mildred had not come in. As a matter of fact Mildred was at that moment in her bedroom at the top of the house crying her eyes out.

That letter to Laura had certainly been difficult, but Mrs. Radcliffe felt a sense of great relief at having at last written it. It had been hanging over her for days.

Laura was her Aunt Marion's daughter and they had been at school together. Laura's whole life, in Mrs. Radcliffe's opinion, had been untidy, inefficient and annoying. To begin with she had married a drunkard with no money who had finally deserted her and died in Rio de Janiero. After that for several years and with two young children on her hands she had contrived to run a tea-shop at Hove and carry on a scandalous affair with a married man at the same time. In the year 1912 she had married again, a handsome but vague young man also with no money to speak of, who had later been killed in the retreat from Mons. In the intervening years between the Armistice and 1930 she had fortunately been abroad running a pension in some dead-and-alive seaside town in Northern Italy. Meanwhile the children of her first marriage had grown up. The boy, Frank, had married and gone off to plant rubber in Burma and was seldom heard from, while the girl, Estelle, had also married and, with an inefficiency obviously inherited from her mother, had died in child-birth, having misjudged her time and been caught in labour on a Channel Island steamer in the middle of a storm. Laura, now a woman of over sixty, had been living ever since in a small house in Folkestone only just managing to pay the rent every quarter by taking in paying guests. Almost the most irritating thing about her was her unregenerate cheerfulness. Even in the begging letter Mrs. Radcliffe had received from her a few days back there had been an irrepressible note of flippancy. Mrs. Radcliffe picked it up from the desk and

re-read it for the third time.—"My dear Adela," she read, "I am in the soup this time and no mistake. Please forgive me for worrying you with my troubles, but I really don't know where to turn. Mr. Roland, one of my extra quality streamlined P.G's., upped and left me on Saturday without paying his month's board and lodging and I was counting on it to pay off the last instalment on my dining-room set. I owe eighteen pounds on it and unless I pay it by Friday they'll come and take every stick away and poor Mr. Clarence Sims and Mr. Brackett, my other two gents, will have to sit on the bare floor. I do feel dreadful asking you to lend me ten pounds temporarily. I can raise eight all right on mother's silver, but if you possibly can spare it do please help me as I am in a flat spin and worried to death. I promise to pay it back within the next three months. Your distracted but affectionate cousin, Laura." Mrs. Radcliffe replaced Laura's letter in its envelope and read once more her own firm and admirable answer to it.

My dear Laura, your letter was a great surprise to me, not having heard from you for so long. Believe me, I sympathise with you more than I can say in all your worries. If you will remember I always have. (*Underlined.*) *How very disgraceful of your lodger to leave without paying you. Wasn't it a little unwise to take in that sort of man in the first place? However, it's no use crying over spilt milk, is it? With regard to your request for ten pounds, I am afraid that is quite out of the question at the moment. As you know I have many calls upon my purse*

in these trying times especially now that the Orphanage, of which I am vice-president, is becoming so overcrowded that we find ourselves forced to build a new dormitory for the little ones to which we all, that is the committee and myself, have had to subscribe a great deal more than we can afford. You see we all have our little troubles! However, as we are such old friends, let alone actual blood relations—I always think that sounds so unpleasant, don't you?—I cannot bear to think of you in such dire straits, so I am enclosing a cheque for three guineas. This is most emphatically not a loan as I cannot bear the thought of money transactions between friends. Please, dear Laura, accept it in the spirit in which it is offered. Stanley joins me in the warmest greetings. I remain, your affectionate cousin, Adela Radcliffe.''

Mrs. Radcliffe sat down at the desk again and wrote out the cheque, then, having placed it with the letter in an already addressed envelope, she licked it down and stuck a stamp on it with an authoritative thump of her fist. This done she sat back in her chair and relaxed for a moment. What a pleasant thing it is, she reflected, to be in the fortunate position of being able to help those who, owing to defects in character and general feckless-ness, are so pitifully unable to help themselves. In this mood of justifiable satisfaction, and humming a little tune, she went down into the kitchen to interview the Cook.

4

Mrs. Brodie had cooked for Mrs. Radcliffe for nearly three years and had, on the whole, proved satisfactory. Mrs. Radcliffe's tastes were simple. She disapproved of high seasoning, rich sauces, and the complicated flub-dubbery of the French school. She designated any dish that was not strictly in accordance with the wholesome English culinary tradition as "Messy," and nobody who knew Mrs. Radcliffe even casually could visualise her for a moment sitting down to anything messy. Mrs. Brodie filled the bill perfectly. True, there were times when she displayed a certain tendency to flightiness. There had been one or two slip-ups. The Malayan curry, for instance (Mrs. Brodie's brother was a sailor), and the dreadful time the Piggots came to dinner and had been offered soufflé en surprise, the cold middle part of which had so surprised Mrs. Piggot's wisdom tooth that she had had to lie down on Mrs. Radcliffe's bed and have her gum painted with oil of cloves. All that, however, was in the past, although an occasional reminder of it came in handy as a curb whenever Mrs. Brodie showed signs of rebellion.

This morning there was no spirit in Mrs. Brodie at all, she had her own private troubles, as indeed who has not, and to-day they had come to a head. In the first place her widowed sister had been whisked off to the hospital to be operated on for gall-stones, thereby leaving no one to look after Mrs. Brodie's husband who had had two

strokes in the last nine months and was due for another one at any moment. This had necessitated some quick thinking and the sending of a telegram first thing to a niece in Southampton, together with a money order for fare and expenses. Mrs. Brodie devoutly hoped that at this moment the niece was already in the train. In the meantime she had telephoned to Mrs. Marsh, her next-door neighbour, asking her to pop in from time to time during the day and see that Mr. Brodie was all right. She planned to slip over herself during the afternoon to see that the niece was safely installed, and call at the hospital for news of her sister. This obviously meant asking Mrs. Radcliffe's permission, as Mrs. Brodie's home was in Maidstone, twenty miles away by bus, and in order for her to get there and back dinner would have to be later than usual and a scratch meal at that. At Mrs. Radcliffe's first words her heart sank. "Good morning, Cook. I want a particularly nice dinner to-night. The Vicar and Mrs. Duke are coming, also Miss Layton and Mr. Baker. Have you any suggestions?" Mrs. Radcliffe spoke kindly, in the special smooth voice she reserved for the Lower Orders. The lower orders, she knew, appreciated differences in class as keenly as anybody, that was one of the fundamental virtues of the English social structure and the reason that no nonsensical experiments such as Bolshevism or Communism or anything like that could ever take root in the British Isles. Class was class and there was no getting away from it, you only had to look at the ineffectiveness of those little men

who shouted from sugar-boxes in Hyde Park to realise how secure England was from disintegration. Everybody knew that they were paid by the Russians anyhow.

Mrs. Brodie looked at her mistress's gentle, pale face and pleasant smile and, for one wild instant, contemplated telling her about her sister's gall-stones and Mr. Brodie's imminent and probably final stroke and imploring her to cancel her dinner-party for to-night. The impulse died as soon as it was born and she found herself trembling at her temerity in even having thought of such a thing.

"Very good, 'um," she said. "We might start with cream of tomato"—Mrs. Radcliffe nodded—"then fillets of plaice?" Mrs. Radcliffe pursed her lips thoughtfully and then shook her head. "Lemon sole," she said. Mrs. Brodie wrote "lemon sole" down on a slate; the slate pencil squeaked causing Mrs. Radcliffe to draw in her breath sharply and close her eyes. Mrs. Brodie went on—

"Rack of lamb, mint jelly, new potatoes, beans or peas?"

"Peas," said Mrs. Radcliffe laconically.

Here Mrs. Brodie, having gallantly consigned her personal sorrows to the back of her mind and feeling oppressed by the uncompromising ordinariness of the menu, ventured a daring suggestion—

"I read a lovely new receipt for a sweet in *Woman and Home* the other day," she said eagerly, doubtless feeling subconsciously that the thrill of a new experiment might

drug her mind into forgetfulness of her troubles—it's called 'Mousse Napoleon' and——"

Mrs. Radcliffe cut her short. "I would rather we took no risks to-night, Cook," she said firmly. "We will have Apple Charlotte and a baked custard for Mrs. Duke who, as you know, has only recently recovered from influenza"; then, detecting in Mrs. Brodie's eye a fleeting but unmistakable expression of defiance, she thought it advisable to show the whip, not use it, just show it. She laughed indulgently and with the suspicion of an edge in her voice said, "We don't want any repetition of that unfortunate experience we had with the soufflé for Mr. and Mrs. Piggot, do we?"

Mrs. Brodie lowered her head. "No, 'um," she murmured.

"Then that will be all," said Mrs. Radcliffe lightly. "I shall be out to lunch."

Mrs. Brodie watched the door close behind her and sat down at the kitchen table. She felt low, dispirited, as though the hand of God were against her. It wasn't only Alice's gall-stones and Mr. Brodie and the nuisance of Eileen having to be sent for and boarded and fed. Those were the sort of things in life that had to be faced. It was less than that and yet somehow more. Suddenly her whole being was shaken by a blind, vindictive hatred for Mrs. Piggot. "Silly old bitch!" she said out loud. "Wisdom tooth indeed! I'd like to yank the whole lot out with the pliers!" In a moment her rage subsided and she felt ashamed. She sat there idly for a moment

wondering whether or not it would do her good to give way and have a nice cry. She was a great believer in a nice cry from time to time when things got on her nerves, it sort of loosened you up; however, the fact that Mildred had been crying steadily for two hours dissuaded her. "It would never do for all of us to be mooching about the house with red eyes," she reflected. "Whatever would happen if someone came to the front door! A nice thing that would be!" The clock on the dresser struck half-past ten, at the same moment Mildred came into the kitchen, pink and swollen, but calm.

"Cheer up, Mildred," said Mrs. Brodie comfortingly. "There's just as good fish in the sea as ever come out of it. Let's make ourselves a nice hot cup of tea."

5

After her successful interview with Mrs. Brodie, Mrs. Radcliffe went upstairs to put on her hat. She debated in her mind whether she should catch the eleven o'clock train to London which would get her to Charing-Cross at twelve-five, thus giving her a whole hour to fill in before she was due to lunch with Marjorie and Cecil, or wait for the twelve o'clock which would get her to Victoria at twelve-fifty. She could certainly utilise that extra hour in town by doing Swan and Edgar's before lunch instead of afterwards, but on the other hand as she had arranged to spend the entire afternoon shopping

with Marion anyhow, perhaps an hour in the morning as well might be too much of a good thing. Also, if she took the twelve o'clock she would have time to call in at the Orphanage on the way to the station and have a little chat with Matron. She made one of her characteristically quick decisions. The twelve o'clock.

Mrs. Radcliffe's little chats with Matron took place on an average of about once a fortnight. They were unofficial and the other members of the executive committee, who met on the first Tuesday of every month, were unaware that they took place at all. If they had they might conceivably have been a trifle annoyed, people were like that, reluctant to take a practical personal interest themselves over and above their official capacities and yet oddly resentful of anyone who did. This regrettable human weakness was clearly recognised by both Matron and Mrs. Radcliffe, and, without saying so in so many words, they had tacitly agreed upon a policy of discreet silence. As Matron boldly remarked one day, "What the eye doesn't see the heart doesn't grieve over." These clandestine meetings were very useful to Mrs. Radcliffe. The various titbits of information and gossip concerning members of the staff, the oddities of the children, etc.—some of them not always pleasant—all combined to give her a knowledge of the inner workings of the institution that came in handy at meetings. Had it not been for Matron she would never have been able to unmask that most distressing business last year of Hermione Blake and Mr. Forrage, a hirsute

young man who tended the garden and did any other odd manual jobs that were required of him. She remembered how, fortified by her private information, she had swayed the whole committee. Mr. Forrage, due to her eloquence, had been summarily dismissed, while Hermione Blake, a sullen girl obviously devoid of moral principles, had, after a long cross-examination and ultimate confession, been justly robbed of her status as a prefect and forbidden, on threat of being sent to a Reformatory, to speak to anybody whatsoever for three months. This punishment had not worked out quite as effectively as had been hoped, for apparently, according to Matron, the girl, after moping and crying for a week or so, had decided to treat it as a sort of game and invented a series of extravagant gestures and signs that caused so much laughter in the dormitory that Matron had been forced to send her to sleep in one of the attics by herself.

A plump, spotty girl, Ivy Frost by name, ushered Mrs. Radcliffe into Matron's private sanctum. It was a small room congested with personal effects. There were a great number of photographs of Matron's friends and relatives; a varied selection of ornaments, notably a small china mandarin whose head wobbled if you trod on the loose board by the table on which he sat, and a procession of seven ivory elephants on the mantelpiece, graded in size, and being led by the largest one towards a forbidding photograph of Matron's mother sitting under a lamp.

"Well, Ivy," said Mrs. Radcliffe benevolently as she

ensconced herself in a creaking cane armchair by the fireplace and loosened her furs, "and how are you?"

"Very well, thank you, mum."

"That's right." Mrs. Radcliffe put her head a little to one side and scrutinised her through half-closed eyes as though measuring the perspective in a water-colour with which she was not completely satisfied.

"Your spots seem to be worse than ever," she said.

Ivy blushed and looked down. Her spots were the curse of her existence. Nothing she did for them seemed to do any good. A whole pot of cuticura ointment in three weeks, to say nothing of hot compresses and boracic powder, had achieved no signs of improvement; on the contrary, two new ones had appeared within the last few days, one small, on her chin, and the other large, on the side of her nose. She had been teased about them a good deal by the other girls, Mabel Worsley in particular, who, on one occasion, had persuaded all her dormitory mates to shrink away from her shielding their faces with their hands for fear of contamination. This joke had lasted a long while and provided much merriment. Mrs. Radcliffe went on, kindly, but with a note of reproof: "You're at an age now when you should take an interest in your appearance. I expect you eat too many sweets and don't take enough exercise—isn't that so?"

"Yes, mum," muttered Ivy, her eyes still fixed on the carpet.

"Well there you are then," said Mrs. Radcliffe with finality.

Ivy shifted her feet unhappily. It was not true that she had been eating too many sweets. No sweet had crossed her lips for months. Nor was it true that she didn't take enough exercise. She took as much exercise as the other girls and, being a member of the hockey team, more than a great many of them. But she had learned from bitter experience that it was never any use denying anything to those in authority. Authority was always in the right and you were always in the wrong. Much better keep quiet and say as little as possible.

Mrs. Radcliffe, feeling that further discussion would be unproductive, spoke the longed-for words of dismissal:

"Run along now, child, and tell Matron I'm here."

Ivy darted to the door with alacrity and vanished through it, but not quickly enough to escape Mrs. Radcliffe's parting shot—"And the next time I come I expect to see a nice, clean, healthy skin!"

Ivy, safely in the passage with the door closed behind her, contorted her face into the most hideous grimace she could manage and then, with a deep sigh, went off in search of Matron.

The Matron was a small, faded woman of fifty. Her sight was poor, which necessitated her wearing glasses with very strong lenses. These gave her a sinister expression which sometimes had a scarifying effect on the smaller children. However, she was a kind enough creature on the whole, that is to say as kind as it is possible to be without imagination. This deficiency occasionally caused her to be crueller in the discharging

of her duties than she really intended to be. A few of her charges liked her, the majority tolerated her, while only a very small number actually detested her.

She was in the middle of her weekly locker inspection when Ivy Frost burst in and told her that Mrs. Radcliffe had arrived, and notwithstanding the fact that she had just found a lipstick together with a packet of "papier poudré" in Beryl Carter's locker, cunningly concealed in the leg of a pair of combinations, and had already sent for Beryl in order to confront her with her guilt, she immediately decided that shocking and urgent though the matter undoubtedly was, it would have to be dealt with later. Mrs. Radcliffe, not only in her capacity as vice-president, but by virtue of her social position in the town, was not the sort of person to be kept waiting for a moment. Also her visits were a great pleasure to Matron. It was, indeed, flattering to be on terms of almost conspiratorial intimacy with anyone so aristocratic and imposing. She hurried along the passages and down the stairs with the eagerness of a romantic girl on the way to meet her lover. By the time she arrived she was quite breathless. Mrs. Radcliffe shook hands cordially, but without rising, Matron pulled the chair away from her writing-desk and sat down on it, quite close to her visitor as though to emphasise the confidential character of the interview.

"Well, well, well," she said, flushing with pleasure. "This *is* a nice surprise!"

"I am on my way up to town," said Mrs. Radcliffe, "to

lunch with my daughter and her husband and do a little shopping, and I thought, as I had a little time to spare, I would drop in and ask you if everything was running smoothly and satisfactorily."

Matron smiled deprecatingly and replied in a tone of bright resignation:

"As well as can be expected."

"You look a little tired, Matron. I hope you haven't been overdoing it?"

"Oh no, Mrs. Radcliffe." Matron shook her head. "Of course, there *is* a lot to be done and with such a small staff we all get a bit fagged sometimes, but still it's no use complaining, is it? After all, that's what we're here for."

Mrs. Radcliffe smiled understandingly and there was silence for a moment. These preliminaries had by now become almost a ritual, the actual phrasing might vary with different visits, but the essence remained the same. Mrs. Radcliffe was always on her way to somewhere else and just happened to drop in casually, and Matron was always overcome with flattered surprise. Mrs. Radcliffe unfailingly commented upon Matron's tiredness, and Matron invariably denied it with an air of gallant stoicism. This over, they wasted no time in getting down to brass tacks.

"How is Elsie Judd?" said Mrs. Radcliffe, lowering her voice and leaning forward in her chair, which gave an ominous crack as though anticipating the worst. The adolescent processes of Elsie Judd, an over-

developed girl of fourteen, had been causing some anxiety.

"Better," replied Matron, also lowering her voice. "I thought it advisable to call in Doctor Willis. He examined her most thoroughly and told me afterwards that if we kept her quiet and watched her carefully for a few months that it would all blow over."

Mrs. Radcliffe nodded approvingly. "Is the new gardener satisfactory?"

Matron gave a little shrug. "In a way he is," she said. "I mean, he keeps everything quite tidy, but he's very slow over odd jobs and, of course, he can't drive the Ford like Mr. Forrage could."

The truth of the matter was that Matron secretly regretted Mr. Forrage. She often reproached herself for having divulged the Hermione Blake business to Mrs. Radcliffe. There might not have been very much in it really, although everybody seemed to think there was, and if she had only kept her mouth shut, and perhaps spoken to Mr. Forrage privately, a great deal of fuss and trouble might have been avoided. The new man, viewed as a possible menace to the chastity of the older girls, was, of course, as safe as houses! In addition to having a wall eye, he was seventy-three and suffered from rheumatism. This, together with his age, not unnaturally restricted the field of his activities somewhat. Running errands, chopping wood, and the various odd jobs of domestic plumbing and carpentry at which his predecessor had been so invaluable, were obviously out

of the question. Apart from this, he was disagreeable, which Mr. Forrage had never been. Yes, Matron definitely regretted Mr. Forrage, and although nothing would have persuaded her to admit it to Mrs. Radcliffe, whose moral indignation had been the cause of his dismissal, she made an inward vow to be a little more wary of her disclosures in the future. However, no major upheaval could possibly result from her discussing with Mrs. Radcliffe the perfidy of Beryl Carter. On the contrary, Mrs. Radcliffe's advice, which was always sensible and the epitome of kindly justice, might prove very useful in helping her to deal with the situation.

"I am very worried," she said, lowering her voice still further, "about Beryl Carter!"

Mrs. Radcliffe rustled expectantly. "Beryl Carter? Isn't that the rather fast-looking girl we had trouble with at the theatricals?"

"It is," said Matron. "And she's been a nuisance ever since. I don't know what's to be done with her, really I don't. Only just now I found a lipstick and one of those Papier Poudré things in her locker—wrapped up in her combinations," she added, as though that made the whole affair more shameful than ever. Mrs. Radcliffe assumed a judicial expression.

"How old is the girl?"

"Getting on for sixteen."

"Hum——" Mrs. Radcliffe thought for a moment. "What was her mother?"

Matron had her answer ready to this, clear and

accurate. She had looked up Beryl's dossier in the files only the other day. "A prostitute," she said. "She died when Beryl was three. The child was looked after by a charwoman, some sort of relative I think until she was eight, then she was sent here."

"There's no doubt about it," said Mrs. Radcliffe sagely, "heredity accounts for a great deal. You'd better send for the girl and let me talk to her."

This was rather more than Matron had bargained for. A little wise advice was one thing, but a cross-examination in her presence might conceivably undermine her own personal authority, and in defence of her personal authority Matron was prepared to fight like a tigress.

"I don't think that would be altogether advisable," she said, and observing Mrs. Radcliffe stiffen slightly, added hurriedly, "She's rather an unruly girl, I'm afraid, and she might be rude. I should hate there to be any unpleasantness."

"You needn't be afraid of that," said Mrs. Radcliffe in a voice that brooked no argument. "I flatter myself that I am capable of dealing with a child of fifteen, however unruly. Kindly send for her at once, Matron. We can decide what is to be done with her after I have talked to her."

It may have been the unexpected peremptoriness of Mrs. Radcliffe's tone, or it may have been that Matron, having passed a sleepless night owing to neuralgia, was inclined to be more irritable than usual that morning. It may have been the weather or it may even have been

some obscure cosmic disturbance. Whatever it was; whatever the cause; what took place was shocking to a degree. Matron lost her temper. To do her justice, she felt it happening and made a tremendous effort to control it; but alas! to no purpose. She felt herself go scarlet and then white again. She was aware of a strange singing in her ears, of great forces at work, rumbling through the room, pushing her over the precipice. She looked Mrs. Radcliffe fair and square in the eye and said, "No!" Not even: "No, Mrs. Radcliffe." Not even: "I'm very sorry, Mrs. Radcliffe, but what you ask is quite impossible." Just a plain unequivocal: "No," spoken more loudly than she intended and without adornment. There ensued a silence so profound that even the infinitesimal creaking of Mrs. Radcliffe's stays as she breathed, could plainly be heard. So charged with tension was the atmosphere, that Matron felt numbed, robbed of all sensation, as though she had been electrocuted. She continued to stare at Mrs. Radcliffe's face, because there didn't seem to be anywhere else to look, also she couldn't have moved a muscle if you had paid her. She watched a small nerve in the region of Mrs. Radcliffe's right eyebrow twitch spasmodically and her expression of blank astonishment slowly give place to one of glacial anger. Still the silence persisted. From the world beyond those four walls, the ordinary, unheeding outside world, a few familiar sounds penetrated; the grinding gears of a car; a dog barking in the distance; a tram clanking around the corner of Cedar Avenue into the High Street; but Matron heard

them vaguely, remotely, as though they belonged to another existence. She experienced the strange sensations of one who is coming to from an anæsthetic. That unutterable fatigue. That reluctance to take up the threads of life again. That deadly, detached lassitude. At last Mrs. Radcliffe spoke. "I beg your pardon?" she said, with such terrifying emphasis on the "beg" that Matron jumped as though someone had fired off a revolver in her ear. Again, to her own amazement, anger seized her. How dare Mrs. Radcliffe speak to her in that tone as though she were a menial? What right had she to come here and demand to interview Beryl Carter, or anybody else for that matter? It was nothing more nor less than an unwarrantable liberty, that's what it was. "I'm very sorry, I'm sure," she said, "but I'm afraid I cannot allow you to interview any of the girls without the authority of the committee." This was shrewd of Matron, although not an entirely true statement of fact. Mrs. Radcliffe, as vice-president, was perfectly within her rights in asking to see any of the girls, and Matron knew it as well as she did, but Matron also knew, owing to Mrs. Radcliffe's expansiveness on one or two occasions, that the committee would be far from pleased if it discovered that she was in the habit of making surreptitious visits to the Orphanage behind its back. Mrs. Poindexter in particular who was also a vice-president and who, in addition, was well-known to be on far from cordial terms with Mrs. Radcliffe, would undoubtedly take full advantage of such an excellent opportunity of

attacking her in front of everyone. Mrs. Poindexter had a sharp tongue as Matron knew to her cost. If anyone could floor Mrs. Radcliffe she could. All this and more had already passed through Mrs. Radcliffe's mind and, angry as she was, she fully realised that an open quarrel with Matron would be impolitic to a degree. There were other ways, she reflected, of dealing with a woman of that type. Matron, after all, was not indispensable. She was efficient within her limits, but she was certainly getting on in years, the committee might well be persuaded in the course of the next few months to replace her with somebody younger and more in tune with modern ideas of hygiene. Obviously, poor thing, she had been denied the benefits of breeding and education over and above the regulation course of hospital training, but still an ignorant woman, in such a very responsible position, was perhaps just a trifle dangerous? She was convinced that the Hermoine Blake affair could never have occurred had there been a younger, more authoritative Matron in charge. Observing the palpable vulnerability of her adversary as she sat there opposite her, strained and tense on the edge of her chair, her eyes staring through her spectacles immovably, as though they had been stuck into them from the back, she almost felt it in her heart to be sorry for her. In fact, she definitely was sorry for her; poor stupid woman, having the impertinence to say "No," to her in that shrill hysterical voice, the temerity of referring to the authority of the committee! Authority of the committee, indeed! Mrs.

Radcliffe almost snorted, but restrained herself. She rose from her chair slowly and grandly, complete mistress of the situation, captain of her soul. "Matron," she said, and Matron, also rising, quivered at the sound of her voice as a small fish will quiver when transfixed by a spear. "I must admit I am very surprised, very surprised indeed." She spoke evenly and pleasantly without heat. "Not that you should consider it inadvisable to send for this girl when I asked you to, in that you are perfectly justified; after all, you are in charge here and I am sure we are all only too willing to accede you the fullest authority that your position entitles you to—but——" Here she paused for a moment and adjusted her silver fox—"that you should adopt an attitude that I'm afraid can only be described as downright rude is quite frankly beyond me——"

"Mrs. Radcliffe," began Matron cravenly. The grand manner had triumphed, all anger had evaporated, all passion spent, she felt abject and ashamed—Mrs. Radcliffe overruled her by holding up her hand and smiling, a smile in which there was worldly understanding with just a soupçon of grief——

"Please let me go on," she said gently. "The whole thing has been the most absurd misunderstanding. It was exceedingly tactless and foolish of me to suggest sending for Beryl Carter. I am sure you are perfectly capable of dealing with the matter as it should be dealt with. It was only that I allowed myself to be carried away by my very real interest in this Orphanage and all the

young lives for which we are responsible. I only wish sometimes that some of my fellow-members of the committee felt as personally about it as I do, but doubtless they are too occupied with their own worries. But one thing I must say, Matron, before I leave, and I must go in a moment, otherwise I shall miss my train, and you really won't take offence at this will you?—you are a little touchy you know, sometimes——" She laughed lightly—Matron quivered again and braced herself. Mrs. Radcliffe went on. "It's this—I really hardly know how to put it—but for some time, and this I assure you has nothing to do with this morning whatever, for some time I have been rather concerned about you, in fact only the other day I mentioned it to Mrs. Weecock and Doctor Price at the end of the meeting. You see," here Mrs. Radcliffe paused again as though really at a loss to know how to handle a situation of such appalling delicacy, "you see, you really are a little old to be doing work which demands such an immense amount of physical energy. I am often amazed that you manage as well as you do—and I have noticed, especially just lately, that you have been looking very, very seedy——"

"I assure you, Mrs. Radcliffe——" began Matron again, but once more Mrs. Radcliffe silenced her—"We were wondering whether it wouldn't be a good idea for you to have a little change," she said. "Of course, I haven't mentioned this in full committee yet, I felt that I should like to discuss it with you first—what do you think?"

Here it was, retribution, the axe! Matron saw it there above her head suspended by a hair. A series of sickening pictures flashed across her mind—a letter from the committee containing her dismissal with, at best, a minute pension. The dismantling of her room, the packing of her things. The confused squalor of her married sister's house at Whitby, she wouldn't be able to afford to live anywhere else. All very well for Mrs. Radcliffe to talk about a little change," she knew what that meant all right; the thin end of the wedge. She made a gallant effort to speak calmly, to prove by her perfect poise that she was in the best of health and fit to manage a dozen orphanages for at least another twenty years, but her nerves, which for a considerable time had been stretched beyond endurance, betrayed her. Her humiliation was complete. She burst into floods of tears. Mrs. Radcliffe regarded her pityingly for a moment and then put her arm round her. Matron, her glasses misted with tears and knocked half off her nose by Mrs. Radcliffe's bosom, was unable to see and could only hear and smell. She could hear Mrs. Radcliffe's heart beating and her even, comfortable breathing, and smell a sharp tang of eau-de-Cologne and the rather animal, fusty scent of her fur. Presently she withdrew herself and dabbed blindly at her eyes with her handkerchief. She heard, as though from a long way off, Mrs. Radcliffe's voice saying with a trace of impatience: Come, come, Matron, there's nothing to cry about. The whole episode is forgiven and forgotten." Then she heard the shutting of the door and a

brisk retreating step in the passage and realised that she was alone. Still sobbing, she sank down on to her knees on the floor, groping for her glasses which had finally fallen off entirely. The small china mandarin nodded at her.

6

Mrs. Radcliffe walked to the station with a springy tread. It was a radiant morning. The air was balmy; the sun was shining and a procession of large white clouds was advancing across the sky. They looked beautiful, she thought, so majestic, so removed from the pettiness, the insignificant sorrows and joys of human existence. Mrs. Radcliffe often derived great pleasure from the changing sky. Times out of number she had sat at her window just gazing up into that vast infinity and allowing her thoughts to wander whither they would, occasionally chiding herself humorously for the extravagant fancies that took shape in her mind. How fortunate to be blessed with imagination, to possess that inestimable gift of being able to distinguish beauty in the ordinary. Many of her acquaintances, she knew for a fact, hardly glanced at the sky from one year's end to the other unless to see if it was going to rain. She remembered once saying to Cecil, Marjorie's husband, who after all was supposed to be a painter, when they were standing in the garden one summer evening before dinner, that sunset and sunrise

were God's loveliest gifts to mortals if only they were not too blind to be able to appreciate them. Cecil had laughed, that irritating, cynical laugh of his, and replied that many thousands of people would appreciate them more if they were edible. She recalled how annoyed she had been, she could have bitten her tongue out for betraying a fragment of her own private self to someone who was obviously incapable of understanding it. On looking back, she realised that that was the first moment that she really knew that she disliked Cecil. Of course, she had never let Marjorie suspect it for an instant, and never would. What was done, was done, but still it was no use pretending. "Know thyself," was one of the corner-stones of her philosophy. Poor Marjorie. Poor wilful, disillusioned Marjorie. That Marjorie was thoroughly disillusioned by now, Mrs. Radcliffe hadn't the faintest doubt. Nobody could be married for seven years to a man like Cecil with his so-called artistic temperament, his casualness about money, her money, and his complete inability to earn any for himself, without being disillusioned. Mrs. Radcliffe sighed as she turned into Station Road. What a tragedy!

Marjorie Radcliffe had met Cecil Garfield at a fancy-dress ball at the Albert Hall in 1930. She was up in town for a few days visiting a married school friend, Laura Courtney. There had been a buffet dinner before the ball, in Laura's house in St. John's Wood, and Marjorie, dressed as Cleopatra, a very effective costume that she had designed and made herself, was escorted to the Albert

Hall by Roger Wood, a cousin of Laura's who was in the air force. Roger was not dressed as anything in particular. He was a hearty young man and baulked at the idea of tidying himself up; the most he had conceded to the carnival spirit of the occasion was a false moustache and a dark blue cape lined with scarlet which he wore over his ordinary evening clothes. Marjorie had been rather bored with him and was much relieved when, upon arrival at the ball, they had been accosted in the foyer by a group of hilarious young people none of whom she knew, but all of whom seemed to know Roger. They were whirled off to the bar immediately, to have a drink before even attempting to find Laura and the rest of their party. Among the group was Cecil Garfield, and Cecil was dressed as Mark Antony. This coincidence provided an excuse for a great deal of playful comment from everybody. It would be useless to deny that Cecil looked very attractive as Mark Antony. His physique, much of which was apparent, was magnificent. He had a quick wit and a charming smile and Marjorie danced several dances with him.

At about three in the morning everybody, Laura and her husband included, adjourned to Cecil's studio in Glebe Place to cook eggs and bacon. It was there that Marjorie first realised that he was an artist. Now the word "Artist," to Marjorie, held an imperishable glamour. She had long ago decided that a life such as her mother would have wished her to lead with a conventional husband, a cook and a baby, was out of the

question. Marjorie wholeheartedly detested her suburban existence and, if the truth were known, was none too fond of her mother. Of this unnatural state of affairs, Mrs. Radcliffe was mercifully unaware, and if Mr. Radcliffe occasionally had an inkling of it, he was wise enough to keep his suspicions to himself. Marjorie's predilection for the artistic life had originally started when she was in her 'teens. Miss Lucas, her drawing mistress at school, had, perhaps unsuitably, lent her *The Life of Van Gogh*. Profoundly impressed by this, Marjorie had gone from bad to worse. *My Days with the French Romantics*, *The Beardsley Period*, *Isadora Duncan's Autobiography*, and *The Moon and Sixpence*, had followed each other in quick succession. By the time she was twenty, she had assimilated a view of life so diametrically opposed to her mother's, that existence at home became almost insupportable. She was an intelligent girl, however, wise beyond her years and practised in deceit. A certain proficiency in this direction being essential with a mother like Mrs. Radcliffe, and with a secretiveness that could only be described as downright sly, she kept her own counsel.

When Marjorie first met Cecil she had just turned twenty-one. She was a tall girl with a pale, almost sallow skin, dark hair, and keen, well-set blue eyes. Her figure was good although, as Mrs. Radcliffe frequently remarked, her movements were inclined to be a little coltish; however, she would doubtless soon grow out of that. With common sense unusual in one so young, she

had faced the fact that, though she longed for it above all things, she had no creative ability whatsoever. This does not mean that she had not explored every possibility. She had written poems and began novels—she had taken a course of line drawing at the Slade School, this only after a series of endless arguments with her mother, who had finally given way on condition that she travelled back and forth to London in company with Phyllis Weecock who was taking a stenography course at the Polytechnic. She had sat at the piano for hours trying to string chords together into a tune but alas, with no success, as she invariably forgot the ones she had started with and was incapable of remembering any of it at all the next day. She had, of course, made a bid for the stage, but on this Mrs. Radcliffe had put her foot down firmly. Poor Marjorie. None of it was any good. Her musical ear was non-existent, her drawing commonplace, and her writing devoid of the faintest originality. However, undaunted by all this, she flatly refused two offers of marriage, one from Kenneth Eldridge, the son of one of the partners in her father's firm, and, worse still, Norman Freemantle, whose aunt, Lady Walrond, was not only the widow of a baronet, but owned an enormous mansion near Dorking and was as rich as Crœsus.

Mrs. Radcliffe had risen above Kenneth Eldridge, but the rejection of Norman Freemantle went through her like a knife.

Cecil and Marjorie had sat in a corner together that night after the ball and talked. A few days later they met

by the Peter Pan statue in Kensington Gardens and talked a lot more. They talked of literature, music, religion and morals and agreed on all points. Of painting they talked more than anything. Cecil's gods were Cezanne, Van Gogh, Matisse and Manet. He considered Picasso an intrinsically fine painter, but misguided. Cecil, when he talked of painting betrayed his heart. Marjorie watched him fascinated. She noted the way his body became tense, the swift, expressive movements of his hands, how, when he was describing some picture that meant much to him, he would screw up his eyes and look through her, beyond her, beyond the trees of the park and the red buses trundling along on the other side of the railings, beyond the autumn sunshine and the people and the houses, beyond the present into the future. It was himself he was staring at through those half-closed eyes, himself having painted a successful picture, several successful pictures. Not successful from other people's point of view, perhaps, but from his own. It was when she first saw him like that, unselfconscious, almost arrogant, demanding so much of life and of himself and of anybody who had anything to do with him, that she knew she loved him. More than this, she knew that she could help him and comfort him and look after him. At last she had found someone in whom she could sublimate her passionate, unresolved yearning for creativeness. Five months later she had crept out of the house early on a bleak wet morning in February, travelled to London by the seven-forty-five train, met him under the clock

at Victoria Station and married him at nine-thirty at a Registry Office in Fulham.

Needless to relate, this insane headstrong gesture left a wake of sorrow and suffering in the Radcliffe household only comparable to the darkest moments of Greek tragedy. However, after bitter letters had been exchanged and after over a year had passed, during which time Marjorie and Cecil had endured a penurious hand-to-mouth existence in a small flat in Yeoman's Row, a fortunate miscarriage of Marjorie's, if such an inefficient catastrophe could ever be called fortunate, and her subsequent illness, had at last effected a reunion. Mrs. Radcliffe had come to London. Still grieving, still shocked by filial ingratitude, still licking the wounds in her mother's heart, nevertheless she came. About a month later it was arranged that Mr. Radcliffe should resume the small allowance that he had given to his daughter before her disastrous marriage. This generosity undoubtedly owed something to a remark of Mrs. Poindexter's at a bridge party, when she was heard to say loudly to Mrs. Newcombe that the manners and cruelty of the Radcliffes in permitting their only child to live in abject poverty was nothing short of mediæval.

All this had taken place six years ago. Since then the allowance had been raised, on the stubborn insistence of Mr. Radcliffe, to almost double. Consequently, the Garfields were enabled to live in comparative comfort in a small house behind Sloane Square with a studio at the back converted, at certain expense, from a conservatory.

The fact that Cecil only very rarely managed to sell a picture was a source of great irritation to Mrs. Radcliffe. Having at last, soothed by the passage of time, consented to bury the hatchet and accept her artistic son-in-law, it was extremely frustrating not to be able to refer to his work with any conviction. To say "My son-in-law is quite a well-known painter, you know," was one thing, but it was quite another to say, "My son-in-law is a painter," and upon being asked what kind of a painter, to be unable to explain. If only he would do portraits that had some resemblance to the sitter, or landscapes which gave some indication, however faint, of what they were supposed to be. It was all very fine to argue that a painter painted through his own eyes and nobody else's, and that what was green to one person might very possibly be bright pink to another. All that sort of talk smacked of affectation and highbrowism. What was good enough for Landseer and Alma Tadema was good enough for Mrs. Radcliffe, and, she would have thought, good enough for anybody who had their heads screwed on the right way.

With these reflections she settled herself into the corner seat of a first-class compartment and opened a copy of *Vogue* that she had bought at the bookstall. Just at the instant of the train's starting three people clambered into the carriage. Now it is an odd frailty in the human character that however benevolent and kindly you may be by nature, the influx of strangers into an empty compartment that you have already made your own by

getting there first, is very annoying. Mrs. Radcliffe was no exception to this rule. She looked up testily and was shocked to observe that the interlopers, apart from the initial tiresomeness of their interloping, were quite obviously of the lower classes. Now one of the reasons that Mrs. Radcliffe, who was naturally thrifty, always paid without regret the extra money for a first-class ticket instead of a third, was in order to avoid contact with the lower classes. Not that she had anything against the lower classes, she hadn't. She defied anyone to be more democratic spirited, to have a warmer, more genuine sympathy and understanding for those who happened to be in less fortunate circumstances than herself. But when she bought a first-class ticket she demanded the first-class privileges that the ticket entitled her to. Therefore she was perfectly justified in regarding these three most unprepossessing-looking people, with marked disapproval. The man, who wore a cloth cap and a dirty handkerchief round his neck, was smoking a cigarette. The woman, probably his wife, was pasty and dressed in a shabby grey coat and skirt, a pink blouse, a mustard-coloured beret and black button boots. The third interloper was a boy of about eleven. He had no hat, unbrushed hair, a sore on his lip and a long mackintosh with one of the pockets hanging out.

Mrs. Radcliffe gathered herself together. "I think you have made a mistake," she said. "This is a first-class carriage."

The man and woman looked guilty. The little boy

didn't look anything at all, he just stared at her. The woman spoke in a husky, whining voice.

"The third class is full," she said. "If we 'adn't of 'opped in 'ere double-quick we'd 'ave missed the train."

"In that case," said Mrs. Radcliffe, "you will be able to get out at the next station and change."

"I don't see 'ow it's any of your business any'ow," muttered the man sullenly.

Mrs. Radcliffe ignored him and looked out of the window. There was silence for a moment which was broken by the little boy saying loudly, "'Oo does she think she is?"

The woman giggled.

"Never you mind," she said. "The Queen of Roumania as like as not!"

"Shut up!" said the man. There was another pause and then the woman spoke again. "I will say it's a treat to be able to take yer weight off yer feet for a minute," she murmured. "I'm worn out and that's a fact."

"Shut up grumbling," said the man.

"I wasn't grumbling," she replied with spirit. "Just talking to pass the time." The man shot a baleful glance at Mrs. Radcliffe. "Well, pass the time some other way," he said, "you might upset 'er ladyship."

Mrs. Radcliffe peered out of the window as though she had suddenly recognised a horse that was grazing in a field.

"That would never do," said the woman with another giggle. "She might 'ave us sent to jail, I shouldn't

wonder. Be quiet, Ernie, and stop fiddling with that mac, you'll 'ave the button off in a minute."

Presently the train drew into a station. Mrs. Radcliffe withdrew her gaze from the window and looked the man straight in the eye. He held his ground for a moment and then quailed. Nobody moved. The train stopped.

"I don't wish to have to complain to the guard," said Mrs. Radcliffe.

A thunderous look passed over the man's face, he spat out his cigarette violently so that it fell at Mrs. Radcliffe's feet, then he jumped up.

"Come on, Lil," he said. "Look lively." He opened the door and they all three clattered out on to the platform. He slammed the door and then pushed his face in at the window causing Mrs. Radcliffe to shrink back.

"I'll tell you what your sort need," he snarled. "And that's a nice swift kick up the What's-it!"

The woman giggled shrilly again and they were gone. Mrs. Radcliffe fanned herself with *Vogue*. What a very unpleasant experience.

7

When Mrs. Radcliffe arrived, Marjorie opened the door to her herself. They had a maid but she was in the kitchen preparing the lunch. Cecil was still working in the studio and so Marjorie and her mother sat in the drawing-room to wait for him. The drawing-room was on the ground

floor and the dining-room opened out of it. The house was small and rather dark and smelt of cooking. Marjorie had tried to mitigate it by burning some scent in a heated iron spoon, but she had done this a little too early, and by now the scent had mostly evaporated whereas the cooking had not. Mrs. Radcliffe glanced around the room with a scarcely perceptible sigh of regret. It was simply furnished and neat enough, and there was a profusion of flowers, Marjorie's one extravagance was flowers, but it was far far removed from the setting her maternal imagination had originally painted for her only daughter. Mrs. Radcliffe looked at her only daughter curled up in the corner of the sofa, so unlike her in every respect, with her dark cropped hair, her large horn-rimmed glasses and her serviceable oatmeal-coloured frock over which she wore a flamboyant bolero jacket of bright scarlet, and marvelled that from her loins should ever have sprung such a baffling disappointment. Marjorie at the same time was observing her mother with equal wonderment. It was always like this. They always met as strangers, and it usually took quite a while to establish a point of contact. Mrs. Radcliffe's visits were fortunately rare. Marjorie wholeheartedly dreaded them, and it is possible that her mother did too, but immutable forces insisted on them taking place. It is doubtful whether Marjorie would have shed a tear had she been told that she was never going to set eyes on her mother again. It is also doubtful whether Mrs. Radcliffe would have minded much either. She would shed a tear certainly,

many tears. She would be, for a time, inconsolable, but genuine grief, the desolate heart, would be lacking.

"How's father?" asked Marjorie.

"Very well indeed. He had one of his liver attacks last week but it didn't last long. He made a great fuss about it, you know what father is."

Marjorie nodded understandingly, the ice thawed slightly in the warmth of their both knowing what father was. Marjorie jumped up from the sofa and went over to a table by the window.

"Let's have some sherry," she said. "Cecil will be here in a minute." She poured out two glasses and brought them over carefully. "I'm afraid I've filled them rather too full."

Mrs. Radcliffe took hers and held it away from her for the first sip in case a drop should fall on her knees.

"How is Cecil?"

"Bright as a button. He's been working like a dog for the last two weeks."

"Really?" The vision of Cecil working like a dog did not impress Mrs. Radcliffe. In the first place she didn't believe it. She didn't consider that painting away in that studio constituted work at all. It was just dabbing about. Cecil, as far as she could see, spent his whole life dabbing about. She naturally didn't say this to Marjorie. Marjorie was inclined to be over-vehement in defence of her husband's activities.

"Has he managed to sell any more pictures lately?" she enquired. "The any more" was purely courtesy. As far

as she could remember Cecil had only sold one picture in the last eighteen months and for that he had received only twenty pounds.

An expression of irritation passed over Marjorie's face, but she answered amiably enough. "He's planning to have an exhibition in June. Lady Bethel is lending him her house for it."

This caused Mrs. Radcliffe to sit up as Marjorie had intended that it should.

"Is that the Lady Bethel who organised that charity pageant just before Christmas?"

"Yes," said Marjorie. "She's a darling, there was a lovely picture of her in the *Tatler* last week: going to a Court ball," she added wickedly.

Mrs. Radcliffe was clearly puzzled. Lady Bethel was certainly an important figure. If she was willing to lend her house for an exhibition of Cecil's paintings it might mean—here her reflections were disturbed by Cecil himself coming into the room. He had washed and tidied himself for lunch, but for all that he looked ill-groomed. His hair was too long, he wore no tie and there were paint-stains on his very old grey flannel trousers. He bent down and kissed Mrs. Radcliffe on the cheek and then poured himself out some sherry.

"How are you, Marm?" he said breezily. He always addressed her as "Marm" and there was a suggestion in his tone of mock reverence which never failed to annoy her. "You look shining and beautiful."

Mrs. Radcliffe deplored extravagance of phrase. She

answered rather tartly, "Very well indeed, thank you, Cecil."

Cecil came over and leant against the mantelpiece, looking down at her. She was forced to admit to herself that he was handsome in a loose, slovenly sort of way, but she could never be reconciled to that hair, never, if she lived to be a thousand.

"I've been telling mother about Lady Bethel promising to lend her house for your exhibition," said Marjorie a trifle loudly.

Was it Mrs. Radcliffe's fancy or did Cecil give a slight start of surprise?

"Yes," he said with marked nonchalance. "It's sweet of the old girl, isn't it?"

Something in Mrs. Radcliffe revolted at Lady Bethel, *The* Lady Bethel, being referred to as an old girl, but she didn't betray it.

"It certainly is very nice of her," she said. "But she has a great reputation, hasn't she, for giving a helping hand to struggling artists."

Cecil, disconcertingly, burst out laughing. "Touché, Marm," he said. "Come along and let's have some lunch." He helped her out of her chair with elaborate solicitude and led the way into the dining-room.

Lunch passed off without incident. The conversation, although it could not be said to sparkle, was at least more or less continuous. Cecil was in the best of spirits. He was extremely attentive to Mrs. Radcliffe, always it is true with that slight overture of mockery, that subtle implication

in his voice and his gestures that she was a great deal older than she was, and had to be humoured at all costs. He insisted, with playful firmness, that she drank some Chianti which she didn't really want, as wine in the middle of the day was apt to make her headachy in the afternoon. He displayed the most flattering interest when she described her visit to the Orphanage and the tact and kindliness she had had to exert in dealing with Matron, and when she told of her unpleasant adventure in the train, he was shocked beyond measure and said that that sort of thing was outrageous and that something ought to be done about it. During this recital Mrs. Radcliffe observed that Marjorie was bending very low over her plate, and wondered whether her near-sightedness was getting worse. Although fully aware that her long experience and inherent social sense were responsible for the success of the lunch party, Mrs. Radcliffe was not too occupied to notice that the soup was tepid, the fillet of steak much too underdone and that there was garlic in the salad. All of this saddened her. It was indeed depressing to reflect that Marjorie, with the lifelong example of her mother's efficiency before her, was still unable to turn out a simple, well-cooked meal. However, with her usual good-humoured philosophy she rose above it. It took all sorts to make a world and if, by some caprice of Fate, her own daughter had turned out to be one of the less competent sorts, so much the worse.

After lunch was over and they had had their coffee (lukewarm), in the drawing-room, Mrs. Radcliffe

expressed a desire to see Cecil's pictures. This request was made merely in the spirit of conventional politeness. She had no real wish to see his pictures, as she knew from experience that there was little or no chance of her admiring them. Cecil and Marjorie were also perfectly aware of this, but nevertheless, after a little humming and hawing Cecil led the way into the studio. Marjorie walked behind with rather a lagging tread. The untidiness of Cecil's studio always struck Mrs. Radcliffe with a fresh shock of distaste. It was inconceivable that anyone, however artistic, could live and breathe amid so much dirt and squalor. The table alone, which stood under the high window, was a sight to make the gorge rise. On it were ash-trays overflowing with days' old cigarette-ends, two or three used and unwashed tea-cups, a bottle of gin, a noisesome conglomeration of paint-tubes of all shapes and sizes, many of them cracked and broken so that their contents was oozing out and all of them smeared with a brownish substance that looked like glue, a pile of books and magazines, countless pencils and crayons and pieces of charcoal and, most disgusting of all, a half-full glass of milk, round the rim of which a fly was walking delicately. The rest of the room was equally repulsive. There was a model throne draped with some dusty material, a gas-fire with a bowl of water in front of it, in which floated several more cigarette-ends, two easels, several canvases stacked against the wall, a large divan covered in red casement cloth and banked with paint-stained cushions and a

pedestal supporting a sculpture in bronze of a woman's breast. It was only by the greatest effort of self-control that Mrs. Radcliffe repressed a cry of horror.

The picture on which Cecil was working stood on the bigger of the two easels in the middle of the room. It represented a man, or what passed for a man, sitting in a crooked rocking-chair without any clothes on. His legs, which were fortunately crossed, were enormously thick. Upon a slanting table at the right-hand side of the picture was what appeared to be a guitar together with a vase of flowers, a bottle and a fish. The paint on the canvas looked as though it had been flung at it from the other side of the room. There was not a trace of what Mrs. Radcliffe had been brought up to recognise as "fine brush work." In fact there didn't appear to be any brush work at all. She regarded in silence for a moment and then shook her head. "It's no use," she said, trying to keep the irritation out of her voice. "I don't understand it."

"Never mind, Marm," said Cecil cheerfully. "It's not really finished yet, anyhow."

"But what does it mean?"

"It's called 'Music'," said Marjorie as though that explained everything.

"I still don't understand what it *means*," said Mrs. Radcliffe.

Cecil exchanged a quick look with Marjorie, who shrugged her shoulders. This annoyed Mrs. Radcliffe. "I'm sure you think I'm very ignorant and old-fashioned," this time making no attempt to control her

irritation, "but I don't approve of this modern futuristic art and I never shall. To my mind a picture should express beauty of some sort. Heaven knows, there is enough ugliness in the world without having to paint it——"

"But we don't think that picture is ugly, mother," said Marjorie with an edge on her voice. Cecil looked at her warningly. Mrs. Radcliffe sniffed.

"You may not think it's ugly and your highbrow friends may not think so either, but I do," she said.

"Our friends are not particularly highbrow, Marm," he said gently. "And as a matter of fact, nobody has seen this picture yet at all. You're the first, you should feel very honoured," he added with a disarming smile. Unfortunately, however, the smile was not quite quick enough and failed to disarm. Mrs. Radcliffe was by now thoroughly angry. The Chianti at lunch had upset her digestion as she had known it would and, having endured that inferior, badly cooked food and done her level best to be pleasant and entertaining into the bargain, to be stood in front of a daub like this and expected to admire it was really too much. In addition to this, both Cecil and Marjorie had a note of patronage in their voices which she found insufferable. All very fine for them to be patronising when they were living entirely on her money, or rather Mr. Radcliffe's which was the same thing. All very fine for a strong, healthy young man of Cecil's age to fritter his time away painting these nonsensical pictures when he ought to be in some steady job shouldering his

responsibilities and supporting his wife in the luxury to which she had been accustomed. All very fine to allude to Lady Bethel as an "old girl" and a "darling" in that casual intimate manner and boast that she was going to lend her house for an exhibition of Cecil's paintings. If Lady Bethel considered that that sort of nonsense was worthy of being exhibited she must be nothing short of an imbecile. In any case, she strongly doubted that Lady Bethel had promised any such thing. She recalled the swift look that had passed between Cecil and Marjorie before lunch, and the rather overdone nonchalance of Cecil's tone. The whole thing was nothing but a lie in order to impress her. The suspicion of this, which had lain dormant at the back of her mind throughout the whole of lunch, suddenly became a conviction. Of course that was what it was. A deliberate lie calculated to put her in the wrong, to make her feel that her criticisms of Cecil's painting in the past had been unjust, and to try to deceive her into the belief that he was appreciated and understood by people who really knew, whereas all the time he was nothing more nor less than the complete and utter failure he always had been and always would be. Mrs. Radcliffe decided to speak her mind.

"Cecil," she said in an ominous voice, "I have something to say to you that I have been wishing to say for some time past."

The smile faded from Cecil's face, and Marjorie walked across purposefully and slipped her arm through his.

"Fire away, Marm," he said with a certain bravado, but she saw him stiffen slightly.

"I want to suggest," went on Mrs. Radcliffe, "that you give up this absurd painting business once and for all and find some sort of job that will bring you in a steady income——"

"Give up his painting, mother, you must be mad!" said Marjorie angrily.

Cecil patted her arm. "Shut up, darling," he said.

Mrs. Radcliffe ignored the interruption and continued: "I have talked the matter over with my husband." This was untrue, but she felt that it solidified her position. "And we are both in complete agreement that it is nothing short of degrading that a young man of your age should be content to live indefinitely on his wife's money."

There was dead silence for a moment. Mrs. Radcliffe's face was flushed and the corners of Cecil's mouth twitched.

"I'm sure father said no such thing," said Marjorie.

"Kindly let me speak, Marjorie." Mrs. Radcliffe looked at her daughter coldly.

"I think, Marm," interposed Cecil, "that anything more you said might be redundant."

"Nevertheless," went on Mrs. Radcliffe, "I would like to say this——"

Marjorie broke away from Cecil and came close to her mother. Her face was white with anger. "You will not say another word," she said. "You will go away

now out of this house and you will never set foot in it again!"

Mrs. Radcliffe fell back a step, genuinely horrified at the passionate fury in her daughter's face. "Marjorie!"

"I mean it," Marjorie was clenching and unclenching her hands. Cecil stepped forward and put his arm round her, but she shook him off.

"No, Cecil, this is between mother and me. She says that for a long time she's been wishing to say those cruel, insulting things to you. Well, I've been waiting a longer time to say a few things to her. I've been waiting all my life and now I'm going to——"

"Darling!" Cecil put his arm round her again and this time held her. He spoke gently, but with an unaccustomed note of sternness. "For God's sake don't. It won't do any good, really it won't, and you'll only regret it afterwards. Whatever you said she'd never understand, never in a thousand years."

Marjorie looked up at his face and he gave a little smile, her lip trembled. "All right," she said in a low voice. "You needn't hang on to me, I won't do anything awful——"

He let her go and she went quickly over to the window and stood with her back turned looking out on to the narrow stretch of garden that separated their house from the house next door. For a moment, while he had been talking something had pierced Mrs. Radcliffe. She was shocked, outraged, angry; all that her affronted pride demanded her to be, but in addition to this, for a brief

instant, the flash of a second, she had been aware of a sharp, overwhelming sense of loneliness. It passed as swiftly as it had come and she was secure again, secure in righteous indignation, wounded as only a mother can be wounded by her daughter's base ingratitude. She closed her lips in a tight line and surveyed Cecil and Marjorie and the studio and everything in it with an expression of withering contempt. Cecil put his hand under her elbow and piloted her to the door. "I think it's time we put an end to this distressing scene," he said. "Come along, Marm, I'll see you to the front door."

They walked through the yard and in through the french windows of the dining-room without a word. She collected her bag and fur from the sofa in the drawing-room.

"Shall I telephone for a taxi?" he asked.

"Thank you, no," she replied with frigid politeness. "I prefer to walk."

He held the front door open for her and she descended into the street. A child bowling an iron hoop nearly cannoned into her. She drew aside as an Empress might draw aside from some unmentionable offal in her path and, with a barely perceptible nod to Cecil, walked away.

When Cecil got back into the studio Marjorie was smoking a cigarette. She looked swiftly at him as he came in at the door and noted, with a little tug at her heart-strings, that his face was white and drawn.

"Sorry, darling," she said as lightly as she could.

He looked at his unfinished picture for a moment and

then flung himself on to the divan. "Well!" He spoke in a taut, strained voice. "That was highly instructive, I must say."

"Mother's a very stupid woman," Marjorie said perfectly evenly, there was no anger in her any more. "She doesn't know anything about anything. The fact that we're happy together infuriates her."

"Are we!" said Cecil.

"Oh, Cecil!" Marjorie's eyes filled with tears and she turned away. "How can you be such a bloody fool!"

"There's a certain element of truth in what she says," went on Cecil, intent on masochism. "After all, I do live on your money, don't I?"

"And why in the name of God shouldn't you?" Marjorie flared. "What's money got to do with it? We love each other and trust each other, isn't that enough?"

"It would be nicer though," he said with fine sarcasm, "if *somebody* apart from you and Bobbie Schulter thought I was a good painter! It would be nicer, really a great deal nicer, if I could sell just one God-damned picture occasionally."

"Oh, darling!" Marjorie came over and sat by him on the divan. "Please, please don't go on like that. It's absolutely idiotic and you know it as well as I do. It hurts me terribly when you lash out and say bitter, foolish things that I know in my heart that you don't really mean. Look at me—please look at me and snap out of it."

Cecil looked at her and made a gallant effort to smile.

It wasn't entirely successful, but it was the best he could do. Marjorie flung both her arms round him and drew his head down on to her shoulder. She stroked his hair gently and he wouldn't have known she was crying if a tear hadn't happened to drop on to his neck.

8

Mrs. Radcliffe's blood was boiling and continued to boil through several quiet squares and streets until she turned into Brompton Road. Here she stopped for a moment and consulted her watch which hung from a little gold chain on her bosom. The watch said twenty minutes past two. Marion was meeting her in the piano department at Harrods at half-past, not that either she or Marion intended to buy a piano, but it was as good a place to meet as anywhere else and less crowded. It would never do for Marion to suspect that her blood was boiling, because she would inevitably ask why, and Mrs. Radcliffe would have either to tell her or invent a convincing lie, neither of which she felt inclined to do. She sauntered very slowly towards Harrods in order to give herself time to deal efficiently with her unruly emotions. It was no use pretending one way or the other, she reflected. Marjorie was no daughter of hers. This, of course, was rhetorical rather than accurate, her memories of the pain and indignity of Marjorie's arrival, even after thirty years, were still clear, but still the fact of disowning

Marjorie in her mind, of denying her very existence in relation to herself, somehow reassured her. Mrs. Radcliffe searched in vain through the past to find one occasion on which Marjorie had proved to be anything but a disappointment. Even as a child she had been unresponsive and sometimes actually belligerent. She recalled, still with a blush of shame, the dreadful tea-party when Marjorie, aged four, had spat a whole mouthful of Madeira cake at poor kind old Mrs. Woodwell, who had bent down to kiss her. She recalled how a few years later she had, quite unnecessarily, been sick over the edge of the dress circle during a matinée of *Peter Pan*. She remembered the countless times during adolescence that she had been rebellious, sly, untruthful and sulky. Heaven knew it had been explained to her often enough and with the utmost patience and kindness that an only daughter's primary duty was to be a comfort and support to her mother, and a fat lot of good it had done. Marjorie had never been even remotely a comfort to her mother. On the contrary she had been a constant source of grief and pain to her ever since she was born. Then, of course, the secretiveness and cruelty of running off and marrying Cecil without a word of warning, turning her back on her parents and her home and all the love and affection of years without a regret, without a shred of gratitude. No, Marjorie was certainly no daughter of hers. Much better to face the truth fair and square. The reconciliation a year after the marriage had been a great mistake, she realised that now; in any case, the miscarriage

and illness and everything, had probably been greatly exaggerated in order to play upon her sympathy and get the allowance renewed. There was no love in Marjorie, no gentleness, no affection. That was what was so heartbreaking. If she had been merely self-willed and obstinate. If she had done all she had done and yet betrayed at moments just a scrap of sweetness and understanding, an indication that there was just a little soft womanliness in her character somewhere, then Mrs. Radcliffe would have forgiven her and stood by her and done everything she could to mitigate the disastrous mess she had made of her life, but no, there was no love in Marjorie, not a speck of softness, she was as hard as nails. Better to cut the knot once and for all rather than compromise, rather than humiliate her spirit by making any further bids for a love and affection that, she knew now, had never existed and never could exist, and proceed in pride and loneliness to the grave. Mrs. Radcliffe stopped by a confectioner's at the corner of Ovington Street and wiped away a tear, then she blew her nose and proceeded in pride and loneliness to Harrods.

Marion was dutifully waiting in the cathedral quiet of the piano department. She was the type of woman who is always a little too early for everything, not from any pronounced sense of punctuality so much as an innate determination not to miss a moment. Life to Marion was a glorious adventure. Her zest for enjoyment even after fifty-seven years of strict virginity was unimpaired. She had a small income bequeathed by her father, who had

been a colonel in the Indian Army, the top part of a house in Onslow Gardens, a collection of theatre programmes dating back to eighteen ninety-eight, and a parrot called Rajah, upon which she lavished a great deal of brusque affection. She smoked incessantly and belonged to a small ladies' club in Dover Street which was rather dull, but useful to pop into from time to time and write letters. Her friendship with Mrs. Radcliffe went back to their school-days and was based on romance. Adela Radcliffe, Adela Wyecroft as she had been then, had captained the lacrosse team and had been revered and adored by most of the school and by Marion Kershaw most of all. She still possessed a snapshot of Adela taken when she was sixteen, standing against a background of fierce waves, wearing a small boater, a white dress with high, puffed sleeves and holding an anchor. It was a striking photograph and although the dust of ages lay over the tears that Marion had once shed over it, she cherished it with a certain merry nostalgia.

Adela's attitude to Marion had been then, and was still, one of affectionate tolerance, not entirely free from patronage. In her opinion, Marion was a good sort, but rather a fool and definitely unstable emotionally. She could have married quite well if she had only concentrated a little more. Mrs. Radcliffe could remember several occasions when a little common sense and proper management could have achieved the altar; that young Critchley boy for instance, he had been quite keen on her, and even Admiral Mortimer's son, although on the

whole it was just as well she hadn't married him as he had had to be sent out of the Navy for something or other when he was twenty-four. But Marion was hopeless. She was always getting these wild enthusiasms for people and then dropping them like hot cakes. Look at that Sylvia Bale! A tiresome whining creature if ever there was one. Marion had gone on about how wonderful she was in the most ridiculous way and even went so far as to share a flat with her but not for long. Mrs. Radcliffe remembered how she had chuckled inwardly when Marion, trembling with rage, had recounted to her the beastly behaviour of Sylvia Bale. Mrs. Radcliffe had refrained from saying "I told you so," she was not one to rub it in, but she certainly had known all along and warned her into the bargain.

To-day, Marion was at her most exuberant. She was wearing a tailor-made, none too well cut, a white blouse with rather an arty-looking coloured scarf tied in a knot in front and one of those new-fangled hats perched much too far forward. She was smoking, needless to say. Mrs. Radcliffe was aware of the strong smell of tobacco as she kissed her. Marion, who had nearly finished her cigarette, couldn't find anywhere to crush it out and so before anything could be discussed at all they had to wander about among the Steinways in search of an ash tray. This was typical of Marion. Finally, of course, she had to stamp it out on the carpet and one of the assistants gave her a most disagreeable look.

Marion was full of conversation. She hadn't seen

Adela for ages, but not for *ages!* and there was really so much to tell her that she couldn't think where to begin. Mrs. Radcliffe was really rather grateful for this volubility, for although by now she had regained complete command of herself and had contrived, at God alone knew what cost to her nerves, to present an outward mien as unruffled and tranquil as usual, the fact remained, she was still upset. However strong in character you may be, however bitterly you may have learned through sad experience to discipline yourself to withstand the cruel bludgeonings of Chance, you are after all but human. And Mrs. Radcliffe felt, in justice to herself, that in view of all she had recently gone through, to say nothing of the courage with which she had faced to the full the whole agonising tragedy of the situation, she might be forgiven a little inward weakness, a little drooping of the spirit. There were not many mothers, she reflected, who were capable of cutting their only child out of their hearts at one blow and go out shopping with Marion as though nothing had happened.

Marion, unaware of the abyss of suffering so close to her, continued to chatter like a magpie. "You'd never believe it," she said. "But I did the most idiotic thing the other night. I'd been to the Old Vic with Deidre Waters, you remember Deidre Waters, she married Harry Waters and then he left her and now they're divorced and she's living with Nora Vines and they're doing those designs for textiles, some of them are damned, good too, I can tell you. Well, Deidre arrived to call for me and

kept the taxi waiting, fortunately I was ready, but she rushed me out of the house so quickly that I forgot to take my latchkey out of my other bag. Well, my dear, of course I didn't think a thing about it, it never even crossed my mind, how I could have been such a fool I can't think and, of course, when I got home there I was! Can you imagine? Thank Heaven it wasn't raining but it was bitterly cold and I was in evening dress with only that Chinese coat between me and the elements." She laughed hilariously and went on. "Well, I really was in the most awful state, I couldn't think *what* to do. I knew it wouldn't be any use banging on Mrs. Bainbridge's window, she has the downstairs part you know, for even if I could have climbed across the area railings and reached it she'd never have heard, she's deaf as a post and sleeps at the back anyway. I was absolutely flummoxed. I looked up and down the street and there wasn't a soul in sight and then I walked to the corner to see if I could see a policeman. Of course I couldn't, you can never find one when you want one. I was in despair. I could have gone to the Club of course, but it would have meant waking up the night porter and I hadn't any night-things or anything and anyhow there probably wouldn't have been a room, it's awfully small you know. Then I thought of Deidre and Nora, but you can't swing a cat in their flat and the vision of spending the night on their sofa didn't appeal to me very much I can tell you."

She paused for breath as they turned into the scent

department. "Well—just as I was about to just sit down on the pavement and cry I saw a man, quite a youngish-looking man in a silk hat! I rushed up to him and I must say he looked horrified, but *horrified!* I daren't imagine what he must have thought but I explained and he was absolutely charming. He walked back with me to the house and my dear, would you believe it? He noticed something that I hadn't noticed at all. Mrs. Bainbridge's window was open a little bit at the top! Well, what did he do but take off his coat and hat and put them on the top step and then climb over the railings and break into the house. I was terrified of course that old Mother Bainbridge would think it was a burglar and have a stroke or something but I couldn't help laughing. In a minute or two—I was shivering by this time as you can imagine—I saw the light go up in the hall and he opened the front door and let me in. Of course I asked him to come up and have a whisky-and-soda but he refused; then I helped him on with his coat and hat and off he went! There now. Wasn't that fantastic? I mean the luck of him just coming along at that moment. I couldn't get over it honestly I couldn't. All the time I was undressing and going to bed I kept on saying to myself: 'Well, really!' " The recital might have continued even longer if Mrs. Radcliffe had not interrupted it by demanding of an assistant the price of a bottle of Elizabeth Arden vanishing cream. She had paid scant attention to what Marion had been saying, her thoughts being elsewhere. Even if Marion had known this it is doubtful

whether she would have minded much. Talking, with Marion, was an automatic process like breathing. She didn't talk to inform, or to entertain, or to be answered. She just talked.

They visited several departments and made several minor purchases, Mrs. Radcliffe leading the way, dignified and decisive, with Marion in full spate, yapping at her heels. When finally they emerged into the warm spring sunshine Mrs. Radcliffe was feeling distinctly better. The business of pricing things and buying things had occupied her mind and soothed her. Marion of course was still talking—"And when he walked up to the cage," she was saying, "Rajah put his head on one side and gave him a look and, my dear, if looks could kill that one would have! Needless to say I was *terrified!* You see he's always perfectly all right with women and of course he adores me but he hates *men*. Parrots are like that, you know, always much more affectionate with the opposite sex to what they are themselves; it is extraordinary, isn't it? I mean how sex instincts come out even in birds. Not of course that I ever look on Rajah as a bird, he's a person and a very definite person at that I can tell you. Well, my dear, poor Mr. Townsend said 'Poll, Pretty Poll,' or something and put his finger between the bars of the cage if you please. I gave a little scream. 'Oh, do be careful, Mr. Townsend,' I said. 'He takes a lot of knowing, he does really.' 'I'm used to parrots,' said Mr. Townsend, 'we had one at Epsom for years.' The Townsends live at Epsom you know, and my dear as

he said it, before the words were out of his mouth Rajah bit his finger through to the bone! Now can you imagine?" Marion paused dramatically, this time evidently demanding some sort of response. Mrs. Radcliffe looked at her absently and with an effort wrenched her mind from wondering whether it would be better to do Swan and Edgar's now or leave it until another day.

"How dreadful," she said.

"I didn't know what to do——" Marion was off again having used Mrs. Radcliffe's perfunctory comment as a sort of spring-board. Mrs. Radcliffe, still undecided, led the way up Knightsbridge towards Hyde Park Corner. Perhaps on the whole it would be wiser to leave Swan and Edgar's until next week. She felt she really couldn't face the exertion of getting into a crowded bus and going all that way. The most sensible thing to do would be to have a cup of tea somewhere. Just as they were crossing Sloane Street Marion broke off in the middle of a description of Mr. Townsend's obstinate refusal to allow her to telephone for a doctor. "Adela," she cried, "I'd nearly forgotten. I'd promised to go to Maud Fearnley's shop just for a minute, it's only a few doors down and she'd so love it if you came too. She's the one I told you about you know, whose husband was killed in that motor accident, not that she cared for him very much, but he left her without a penny and so she started this hat shop. I do think people are awfully plucky, don't you? I mean it takes a lot of grit to do a

thing like that. Anyway she calls herself 'Yolande et Cie' and gets a lot of the newest models from Paris, at least, between you and me, I believe what she really does is to pop over there from time to time and just copy the models but for heaven's sake don't say I said so. She's a very old friend of mine and she really is having a terribly uphill struggle. Do come, she'd be so thrilled!"

Mrs. Radcliffe hesitated for a moment and then, swayed by the thought of the obvious pleasure she would be bestowing upon Yolande et Cie by visiting her shop and also by the reflection that if Yolande et Cie was having such an uphill struggle as all that she wasn't likely to be very expensive and it might be possible to find a smart new hat at a lower price than elsewhere, she consented benevolently and they turned down Sloane Street.

Maud Fearnley was a vague, faded woman in the early forties. Marion's enthusiastic allusion to her pluck and spirit and her picture of her as a shrewd, capable business woman dashing back and forth between Paris and London, gallantly fighting step by step to conquer misfortune, was unhappily a trifle inaccurate. True she had been left penniless by the death of her husband and, bolstered up by the energy and financial support of a few strong-minded friends, she certainly had taken over the lease and "good will" of Yolande et Cie, but for all that Maud Fearnley was not the stuff of which conquerors are made. She was a drifter. She had drifted into marriage, drifted into widowhood, and now she

had drifted into a milliner's shop in Sloane Street. On the one occasion when she had happened to drift over to Paris, the results, commercially speaking, had been so far from successful that her friends had implored her never to do it again.

She rose from a small desk when Mrs. Radcliffe and Marion entered the shop and advanced towards them with the incredulous smile of a lonely traveller who unexpectedly happens upon two old school friends in a jungle clearing. She embraced Marion gratefully and was introduced to Mrs. Radcliffe. Mrs. Radcliffe sized her up at a glance. Her quick eye noted the dejected beige dress, the blue knitted wool jacket slung round the shoulders with the sleeves hanging, the mouse-coloured hair and the amiable, rather silly expression. The woman's a fool she decided immediately, probably another of Marion's ridiculous enthusiasms, likely as not they had both planned this casual visit to the shop in order to get her to spend some money. Mrs. Radcliffe, in common with a great many other women of her social position, cherished a firm belief that there existed a sort of tacit conspiracy among those not as comfortably situated as herself, to get at her money. This was not meanness on her part, she knew herself to be generous to a fault, it was merely a resigned acceptance of the frailties of human nature. No one could accuse her of being disillusioned. She was an idealist first and last but, in her wide and varied experience of life she had been forced to admit that if you allowed people to suspect

that you had an assured income it was often liable to bring out the worst in them. One of her complaints against Marion had always been that she never, if she could possibly help it, made the slightest gesture towards paying for anything. Not that she would have permitted her to for a moment, she was perfectly aware of her financial situation and anyhow to be paid for by Marion would have been somehow incongruous, as well imagine a bird of paradise being entertained by a woodpecker. No, it wasn't that she wished Marion to pay for a thing but if she just occasionally made the effort she would have respected her a good deal more. Now in this dim little shop, its whole atmosphere charged with genteel failure, Mrs. Radcliffe scented danger. Mrs. Fearnley's greeting of Marion had been a little too surprised, a tiny bit overdone. The whole thing had probably been arranged over the telephone that morning. To do Marion and Mrs. Fearnley justice it is only fair to say that Mrs. Radcliffe's suspicions on this occasion were unfounded. Mrs. Fearnley had been quite genuinely surprised to see them come into the shop; in fact, poor thing, she was always surprised if anyone came in, and one of her fundamental weaknesses as a saleswoman was her inability to control it. She betrayed too desperate an eagerness, too flagrant an anxiety to please her infrequent customers. She wooed them and fawned upon them to such an extent that they sometimes left the shop in extreme embarrassment without buying a thing. Today, confronted by the majesty of Mrs. Radcliffe she

could hardly contain herself. She gave a series of little gasps and cries of pleasure and one of pain when she happened to pinch her finger in the sliding glass door of one of the show-cases. She showed Mrs. Radcliffe several hats, offering them to her with the despairing subservience of a beggar displaying the stump of an amputated arm and imploring charity. Marion kept up a running fire of comment on each model as it appeared —"There," she said, "isn't that sweet?"—"Ah, now that one I really *do* like." "Look, Adela, at the way that's turned up at the back! Isn't that the smartest thing you've ever seen?" Mrs. Radcliffe looked at them all but without enthusiasm. She even agreed to try two or three on after a lot of coaxing from both Mrs. Fearnley and Marion. They both fluttered about behind her as she stood in front of the glass, heading this way and that and regarding her ecstatically from all angles. Finally she discovered one that really wasn't so bad. It was perfectly plain, which was more than could be said for most of the others, made of black straw with just one greenish-blue quill in it. It really was quite stylish. Mrs. Radcliffe tried it on twice and then returned to it and tried it on once more. She revolved slowly before the mirror holding a hand-glass and scrutinising it from the back and from both sides. It certainly suited her, there was no doubt about that. The excitement of Mrs. Fearnley and Marion rose to fever pitch. At last she turned to Mrs. Fearnley.

"How much is it?" she asked.

Mrs. Fearnley was foolish enough to shoot a triumphant look at Marion.

"Four guineas," she said self-consciously.

"Four guineas!" Mrs. Radcliffe stared at her as though she had gone out of her mind. "Four guineas—for this!"

"It's my very latest model," said Mrs. Fearnley. "It came over from Paris only last week by aeroplane."

Mrs. Radcliffe took it off with a gesture that implied that it could circumnavigate the globe by aeroplane for all she cared and still not be worth four guineas.

"I'm afraid that's far beyond my poor resources!" she said with a cold smile.

"Oh, Adela!" wailed Marion. "It suits you down to the ground."

"I would be willing to make a slight reduction," ventured Mrs. Fearnley.

"I fear that it would have to be a great deal more than a *slight* reduction to satisfy me," said Mrs. Radcliffe with an acid note in her voice. She had not failed to note Mrs. Fearnley's exultant look at Marion before she had quoted the price and it had annoyed her profoundly. It was just as she suspected, nothing more nor less than a put-up job, she wouldn't be at all surprised if this Mrs. Fearnley hadn't agreed to pay Marion a commission. A nice state of affairs when you couldn't even trust your oldest friends. It really was too disheartening the way people behaved, always on the make; it was degrading. But they would find to their cost that it was not so easy to

swindle her as they thought. She looked Mrs. Fearnley steadily in the eye. "To ask four guineas for that hat, Mrs. Fearnley," she said, "is nothing short of outrageous. You know as well as I do that it isn't worth a penny more than a guinea if that!"

Mrs. Fearnley, quailing before this onslaught, was about to speak when Marion forestalled her. Marion's face was quite pink and she looked furious.

"Really, Adela," she said, "I don't think there's any necessity to talk to Mrs. Fearnley like that."

"I resent being swindled," said Mrs. Radcliffe picking up her own hat and putting it on carefully in front of the glass.

"Oh, Mrs. Radcliffe," Mrs. Fearnley burst out in horror, "how *can* you say such a thing. I'm sure I never——"

"Well, really," exclaimed Marion, "I never heard of such a thing, honestly I didn't, never in all my life. Adela, you should be ashamed of yourself, honestly you should. I mean—you can't behave like that, really you can't——"

Mrs. Radcliffe looked at her crushingly. "Don't talk to me like that, Marion," she said. "And don't imagine that I can't read you like an open book because I can. I know perfectly well why you're in such a state. I'm not quite such a fool as you and your friend seem to think I am. I should be interested to know how much commission you expected to receive if I had been stupid enough to pay four guineas for this, this monstrosity." There now, it was out, she had said it and a good job

too. She looked coolly at Marion in the shocked silence that ensued and was gratified to observe that her eyes were filling with tears. Serve her right, that would teach her not to take advantage of a generous life-long friendship.

Marion, making a tremendous effort not to cry, spoke with dignity. "If it was your intention to hurt me," she said, "you have succeeded beyond your wildest dreams. I am very sorry you said what you did, Adela, more sorry than I can say . . ."

"I must say," interposed Mrs. Fearnley, gaining a sort of bleak courage from Marion's obvious distress, "I have never been so insulted in my life, never," she said bridling. "If it were not for the fact that you are a friend of dear Marion's, I should be forced to ask you to leave my shop."

"I have no wish to stay," said Mrs. Radcliffe with hauteur, "and I shall certainly never set foot in it again, nor I assure you, will any of my friends." She glanced at Marion. "I mean naturally my real friends," she added. "Good afternoon."

Mrs. Fearnley and Marion watched the door swing shut behind her and her stately figure pace along by the window and disappear from view; then Marion gave up to the tears she had been so gallantly trying to restrain and sank down onto a small gilt chair with her face buried in her hands.

"Oh dear," she wept. "Oh dear, oh dear—how dreadful—how absolutely dreadful."

Mrs. Fearnley placed her arms round her for a moment and patted her sympathetically and then, with commendable tact, left her to have her cry out while she put the offending hat back into the show-case.

9

Those who knew Mrs. Radcliffe only slightly would have been surprised, whereas those who knew her well would have been downright amazed had they chanced to be strolling through Hyde Park between the hours of four o'clock and six o'clock and observed her sitting on a seat, not even a twopenny green chair, but a seat, alone! Their amazement would have been justifiable because with all her failings, and after all Mrs. Radcliffe was not perfect, she was no loiterer. One could imagine other people, Mrs. Weecock for instance or even, on occasion, the redoubtable Mrs. Poindexter, idling away an hour or so, but Mrs. Radcliffe, never. Hers was far too energetic and decisive a character for it to be conceivable that, in the admirable organization of her days, she should have an hour to spare. But there she was, sitting alone, leaning a trifle against the back of the seat, with her hands folded on her lap. She had taken off her glasses for a moment and on each side of the bridge of her nose there was a little pink line. Before her, in the mellow afternoon light, the unending pageant of London life passed by. Nurses with perambulators and straggling

children; dim-looking gentlemen in bowler hats; a few soldiers arrogant in their uniforms; neatly dressed young women of uncertain profession; various representatives of the lower orders, their children making a great deal more noise than those of higher birth; occasionally somebody's paid companion walking along meekly with a dog, all parading before her weary eyes. In Knightsbridge the constant procession of taxis, private cars, lorries, bicycles and buses provided a soothing orchestration to the scene while every now and then a common London sparrow flew down from the trees and chirruped shrilly quite close to her.

Mrs. Radcliffe however was aware of all this only subconsciously, her conscious mind being occupied, to the exclusion of everything else, with the cruelty and ingratitude of human behaviour. What a day! What a disillusioning day she had had, beset on all sides by ignorance, stupidity, defiance, deceit, rudeness and, in the case of Marion and Mrs. Fearnley, sheer treachery. Why? she wondered without anger, she was no longer angry. Why should all this be visited on her? What had she done to deserve it? She put on her glasses and looked up at the sky, beyond which her indestructible faith envisaged a kindly God, in the vague hope that she might receive some miraculous sign, some indication of where she had erred to merit such harsh treatment. Perhaps, it was just within the bounds of possibility, she had unwittingly committed some trifling sin, some thoughtless act of omission which had brought down this

avalanche of suffering upon her. She scanned the heavens humbly, supplicatingly, but no sign was forthcoming. True there was an aeroplane flying very high over in the direction of Westminster Abbey, and for a moment the light of the sun caught it so that it shone like burnished silver before disappearing behind a cloud, but that could hardly be construed as a sort of reassuring wink from the Almighty. She lowered her eyes again. It was, she reflected without bitterness, inevitable that a woman of her temperament should feel things more keenly, with more poignance than ordinary people. It was one of the penalties of being highly strung. After all, that awareness of beauty, that unique sensitiveness to the finer things of life, had to be paid for. Everything had to be paid for. Your capacity for joy was inexorably balanced by your capacity for sorrow. It was all a question of capacity. Other people, such as Stanley for instance, just existed. Stanley really couldn't be said to live, really live, for a moment. Sometimes, she gave a wry smile, she almost envied him. No ups and downs for Stanley. No ecstasies, no despairs. Just an even, colourless monotony from the cradle to the grave. How extraordinary to be like that and, in some ways how fortunate. Here she gave herself a little shake, she was becoming morbid. It was surely better to live life to the full and to pay the price, however high it might be, than to be a drone without punishment and without reward.

At this rather more comforting stage of her reflections her attention was diverted by a handsome, well-dressed

woman in the middle forties and a distinguished grey-haired man in a silk hat and frock coat, who sat down on a seat almost immediately opposite her. They were unmistakably of high breeding, possibly even titled. They were talking with animation and every now and then, obviously in response to something amusing he had said, she gave a pleasant laugh. Mrs. Radcliffe looked at them with great interest. They had probably been to some grand social function, a reception perhaps or a wedding, although it was a little late for it to have been a wedding. The woman's face seemed familiar to her somehow, she racked her brains for a minute and then suddenly remembered, of course, it was Lady Elizabeth Vale, *The* Lady Elizabeth Vale, she was almost certain it was. Mrs. Radcliffe made no effort to repress a feeling of rising excitement. Lady Elizabeth Vale was one of the most famous women in London society, or in fact any society. An intimate friend of royalty and the wife of one of the most brilliant of the younger Cabinet Ministers, she was well known to combine impeccable breeding with considerable wealth. She was much photographed and she travelled extensively. Her moral reputation was as untarnished as could be expected with such a glare of limelight beating upon her. Her most ordinary activities received the closest attention in the gossip columns but so far no definite hint of scandal had stained her name. It was possible that even if it had Mrs. Radcliffe would have forgiven it. People of the social position of Lady Elizabeth Vale could demand from

Mrs. Radcliffe, should they so wish, an inexhaustible meed of Tolerance and Christian Charity. As she sat there watching the couple out of the corner of her eye, she indulged in a few fleeting fancies. That capacity for reverie so soothing to the bruised ego was strongly developed in Mrs. Radcliffe. She often admonished herself with a lenient smile. "There you go," she'd say, "dreaming again!"

To-day, possibly owing to the disillusionment she had suffered, her imagination was especially vivid. The real world was too pitiless, too sharply cruel. Was it not natural enough that she should seek refuge for a while in the rich gardens of her mind? She gave fantasy full rein. How pleasant it would be for instance if Fate, in the guise of some minor accident such as a child falling down and having to be picked up, should enable her to establish a friendship with Lady Elizabeth Vale. It would of course begin quite casually. "There dear, don't cry." "Poor little thing, I wonder where its mother is." Something quite simple and ordinary like that. Then, the child disposed of somehow or other, a little desultory conversation during which Lady Elizabeth would swiftly recognise what a charming, delightful creature Mrs. Radcliffe was and, with one of those graceful impulses that were so typical, invite her to teal Mrs. Radcliffe saw herself clearly ensconced in a luxurious drawing-room in Belgrave Square; discreet footmen hovering about with delicacies; the light from the fire gleaming on priceless old family silver; the conversation cosy and intimate——

"Dear Mrs. Radcliffe, I know you'll think it fearfully unconventional of me on the strength of such a short acquaintance, but I would so like it if you would call me Elizabeth, Lady Elizabeth sounds so stuffy somehow between friends and I'm sure we're going to be real friends, I felt it at once, the moment I saw you——" Here Mrs. Radcliffe paused for a moment in her flight to ponder the likelihood of it being "Elizabeth" or "Betty." "My dear Elizabeth." "My dear Betty." Betty won. "My dear Betty, of course I should be charmed, and you must call me Adela." Her mind jumped to a Bridge party at Mrs. Poindexter's which she had accepted for next Wednesday. "I'm so sorry, I can't start another rubber, really I can't. I must fly home and dress, I'm dining with Betty Vale and going to the Opera——"

At this point her attention was dragged back to reality by the consciousness that a figure was standing close to her. She looked up and saw the most dreadful old woman. Mrs. Radcliffe positively jumped. The old woman was wearing a threadbare jacket, a skirt literally in rags, gaping boots and a man's old straw hat from under which straggled wisps of greasy white hair. Her face was grey and her eyes red-rimmed and watery. "Please, lady," she murmured hoarsely, "spare us a copper, I 'aven't 'ad a bite to eat all day, honest I 'aven't." Mrs. Radcliffe's first instinct naturally was to tell her to go away at once. These beggars were everywhere nowadays, it was really disgraceful. She glanced round to see if there were a policeman in sight and in doing so

observed Lady Elizabeth Vale looking full at her. Automatically, without thinking, like the reflex action of a motorist who suddenly swerves to avoid a dog that has run out into the road, she plunged her hand into her bag and gave the woman a half-a-crown. The woman looked at it incredulously and then burst into a wail of gratitude. "God bless yer, lady," she cried. "God bless yer kind 'eart"; she wandered away clutching the coin and still mumbling her blessings. Mrs. Radcliffe, with a smile of mingled pity and good-natured tolerance, looked across at Lady Elizabeth Vale for her reward. They would exchange a glance of mutual understanding, a glance expressing a subtle acknowledgment of what had passed, of the bonds of class and distinction that bound them together. That reciprocal glance would imply so much, administer such balm to Mrs. Radcliffe's battered spirit. Unfortunately, however, Lady Elizabeth didn't look at her again, she was immersed in conversation. After a little while she got up, her escort helped her to arrange her sable cape more comfortably round her shoulders and, still talking, they walked away. Mrs. Radcliffe only distinguished a few words as they passed her seat. The man, placing his hand protectively under Lady Elizabeth's elbow said, in an intimate tone of mock exasperation—"My *dear* Elizabeth——"

10

At a quarter to eleven that evening Mrs. Radcliffe went

upstairs to bed. The dinner had been a success on the whole, marred only by the clumsiness of Mildred who had banged against Mrs. Duke's chair while proffering her the baked custard and caused the spoon, with a certain amount of custard in it, to fall onto her dress. Stanley had, as usual, not contributed very much, but the Vicar had been splendid, he had kept everyone highly amused with his imitation of Miss Lawrence trying not to sneeze while she was playing the organ at choir practice, and, after dinner, he had sung "Now Sleeps the Crimson Petal," by Roger Quilter, with great charm and feeling. Miss Layton of course had been rather silly, but then she always was, making sheep's eyes at Mr. Baker all the evening and laughing in that affected way, as though he'd ever look twice at a dried-up frump like her. That dress! Mrs. Radcliffe, as she was taking the pins out of her hair, paused for a moment to smile at the memory of Miss Layton's dress. It really was too absurd, a woman of her age, she must be fifty if she was a day, dolling herself up with all those frills and fol-de-rols. She'd have been much better advised to wear a plain black frock. Mrs. Radcliffe remembered having whispered this naughtily to Mr. Baker who had been on her left, and smiled again.

Presently Stanley came upstairs, she heard him go into his room on the other side of the landing. Stanley really was a very peculiar man. Fancy asking Miss Layton to play like that the moment the Vicar had sat down, indeed, before Mrs. Duke had even left the piano-stool. How

unobservant men were. Couldn't he have noticed that the one thing she had been trying to avoid was the possibility of Miss Layton playing. To begin with she had a very heavy touch and no style whatsoever, also she always insisted upon the piano being opened fully which was a great nuisance as it meant taking off the shawl, the vase and the photographs. In any case it was quite obvious that she only wanted to play at all in order to make an impression on Mr. Baker; however, she certainly hadn't succeeded. Mr. Baker had paid very little attention, even when she had embarked upon "The Gollywogs' Cake-Walk" by Debussy with all that banging in the bass, he had only nodded politely and raised his voice a trifle.

Presently Stanley came in to say "Good-night." She came out of the bathroom and there he was, fiddling about with the things on her dressing-table. Poor Stanley, he was undoubtedly beginning to show his age, she wished he'd learn to stand up a little straighter, stooping like that made him look much older than he really was. If only he had a little more grit, more strength of character. If only he were the sort of man upon whom she could lean occasionally when she felt weary and sick at heart, the sort of man who would put his arms round her and comfort her and bid her be of good cheer. But No; no use expecting any sympathy or demonstrative-ness from Stanley. He was utterly wrapped up in himself and always had been. She had contemplated for a moment, while she was dressing for dinner, telling him

about Marjorie's behaviour, but she had quickly put the thought out of her mind. Stanley always stood up for Marjorie, he would be sure to have twisted the whole thing round into being her fault and then said something sarcastic. He had one of those blind, uncritical adorations for Marjorie that so many elderly fathers have for their only daughters. It was sometimes quite ridiculous the way he went on about her. He even liked Cecil, and said that in his opinion he was a damned intelligent, straightforward young fellow. Straightforward, if you please! Mrs. Radcliffe knew better.

Hearing his wife enter, Mr. Radcliffe stopped fiddling with the things on the dressing-table and looked at her. She was in her nightdress and pink quilted silk dressing-gown; on her feet were her ostrich feather bedroom slippers, looking a trifle draggled; on her large pale face was a layer of Elizabeth Arden cold cream which made it even paler. Her grey hair was tortured into several large curling pins.

"Stanley," she said. "What a fright you gave me." This was untrue. He hadn't given her a fright at all, she had known perfectly well he was there as she had heard him come in when she was in the bathroom, but still it was something to say.

"Sorry, dear," he replied. "I just came in to say 'good-night'."

Mrs. Radcliffe kissed him absently. "Good-night, Stanley." This being said she turned away expecting him to have gone by the time she turned round again,

but when she did he was still there, kicking at the edge of the rug with the toe of his shoe. He looked at her again, his forehead was wrinkled, he obviously had something on his mind.

"What's the matter, Stanley?" she asked, a little impatiently.

"I think you were a bit hard on poor Miss Layton to-night," he suddenly blurted out. "Talking to Mr. Baker like that all the time she was playing. She noticed, you know, and it upset her very much. I walked to the corner with her and she was nearly crying."

"Really, Stanley," said Mrs. Radcliffe with extreme exasperation, "you are too idiotic."

"Idiotic I may be," retorted her husband with unwonted spirit, "but you were unkind and that's worse!"

Mrs. Radcliffe opened her mouth to reply, to give full vent to the annoyance he had caused her, not only at this moment, but the whole evening long, but before she could utter a word he had gone out of the room and shut the door, almost slammed it, in her face. She stood quite still for an instant with her eyes closed and her hands tightly clenched at her sides. This was too much. At the end of a dreadful day like she'd had, for Stanley, her own husband, to fly at her and accuse her of being unkind. After a little she moved over to her bed quivering at the injustice of it all. She knelt down automatically to say her prayers, but it was quite a while before she was able to will herself into a suitable frame of mind. Suddenly, like a ray of light in the dark cavern of her

unhappiness, the incident of the beggar woman in the park flashed into her memory, and with that all disquiet left her. It was like a miracle. When she had finished her prayers and got into bed she was smiling. Unkind indeed!

Nature Study

I

THE heartiness of Major Cartwright had grown beyond being an acquired attribute of mind and become organic. He exuded it chemically as a horse exudes horsiness; as a matter of fact he exuded a certain amount of horsiness as well. He was large and blond and his skin was brickish in colour, the end of his fleshy nose shaded imperceptibly to mauve but not offensively; it blended in with the small purple veins round his eyes which were pale blue and amiable. His best point really was the even gleaming whiteness of his teeth, these he showed a good deal when he laughed, a loud, non-infectious, but frequent laugh.

The barman treated him with deference and he was popular on board owing to his genial efficiency at deck games. In the early morning and later afternoon he played Deck Tennis in saggy khaki shorts, below which he wore neatly rolled stockings and gym shoes and above a rather old blue silk polo shirt opened generously at the neck exposing a few curling fronds of dust-coloured hair.

He was at his best in the smoking-room after dinner,

expanding into "outpost of Empire" reminiscence and calling for "Stengahs," a bore really but somehow touching in his fidelity to type. It wasn't until after Marseilles, where most of the cronies had disembarked to go home overland, that he turned his attention to me. We sat together in the little winter garden place aft of the promenade deck and had a drink before dinner. The lights of Marseilles were shimmering on the horizon and there was a feeling of emptiness in the ship as though the party were over and there were only a few stragglers left. The stragglers consisted of about a dozen planters and their families and three or four yellowish young men from the Shell company in Iraq, who had joined the ship at Port Said and were going home on leave.

He talked a lot but slowly and with great emphasis, principally, of course, about himself and his regiment. On the few occasions when he forsook the personal for the general it was merely to let fly a cliché such as "That's women all over," or "A man who has a light hand with a horse has a light hand with anything." I gently interposed "Except with pastry," but he didn't hear. He suggested that he should move over from his now deserted table in the saloon and join me at mine for the rest of the voyage. I was about to spring to my usual defence in such circumstances, which is that I always have to eat alone as I am concentrated on making mental notes for a book or play, but something in his eyes prevented me, they were almost pleading, so I said with as

much sincerity as I could muster that nothing would please me more, and that was that.

Our tête-à-têtes for the next few days were, on the whole, not as bad as I feared—he was perfectly content to talk away without demanding too many answers. By the time we reached Gibraltar I knew a great deal about him. He had a wife, but the tropics didn't agree with her so she was at home living with her married sister just outside Newbury, a nice little place they had although the married sister's husband was a bit of a fool, a lawyer of some sort with apparently no initiative.

The Major had no doubt that his wife would be damned glad to see him again. He was proposing to take a furnished flat in Town for part of his leave and do a few shows, after that Scotland and some shooting. A friend of his, for some unexplained reason called "Old Bags," had quite a decent little shoot near a place the name of which the Major had as much difficulty in pronouncing as I had in understanding.

I listened to this conversation attentively because I was anxious to discover what, if anything, he had learned from the strange places he had been to, the strange people he had met, the various and varied differences in climate, circumstances, motives and human life that he had encountered. There he sat, sloughed back in a big arm-chair in the smoking-room, his large legs stretched out in front of him and a brandy glass in his hand—talking —wandering here and there among his yesterdays with-out any particular aim and without, alas, the gift of

expressing in the least what he really wanted to say and, worse still, without even the consciousness that he wasn't doing so. His limited vocabulary was shamefully overworked—most of his words did the duty of six, like a small orchestra of provincial musicians thinly attempting to play a complicated score by doubling and trebling up on their instruments. I wondered what he knew, actually knew of the facts of life, not complex psychological adjustments and abstractions, they were obviously beyond his ken and also unnecessary to his existence. But any truths, basic truths within his own circumscribed experience. Had he fathomed them or not? Was there any fundamental certainty of anything whatever in that untidy, meagre, amiable mind? Were the badly-dressed phrases that he paraded so grandiloquently aware of their shabbiness, their pretentious gentility? Did they know themselves to be ill-groomed and obscure, or were they upheld by their own conceit like dowdy British Matrons sniffing contemptuously at a Mannequin Parade?

I tried to visualise him in certain specified situations, crises, earthquakes or shipwrecks, or sudden native uprisings. He would behave well undoubtedly, but why? Could he ever possibly know why? The reason he stood aside to allow the women and children to go first; the exact motive that prompted him to rush out into the compound amid a hail of arrows, brandishing a Service revolver? The impulses that caused his actions, the instincts that pulled him hither and thither, had he any awareness of them, any curiosity about them at all? Was

it possible that an adult man in the late forties with a pattern of strange journeys behind him, twenty years at least of potentially rich experience, could have lived through those hours and days and nights, through all those satisfactions, distastes, despondencies and exhilarations without even a trace of introspection or scepticism? Just a bland unthinking acceptance without one query? I looked at him wonderingly, he was describing a duck shoot in Albania at the moment, and decided that not only was it possible but very probable indeed.

After dinner on the night before we arrived at Plymouth he asked me into his cabin to see some of his snapshot albums. "They might interest you," he said in a deprecatory tone which was quite false, as I knew perfectly well that the thought that they might bore me to extinction would never cross his mind. "There's a damn good one of that sail-fish I told you about," he went on. "And that little Siamese girl I ran across in K.L. after that Guest Night."

I sat on his bunk and was handed album after album in chronological order, fortunately I was also handed a whisky-and-soda. They were all much the same; groups, picnic parties, bathing parties, shoots, fishing parties, all neatly pasted in with names and initials written underneath. "Hong-Kong, March 1927. Mrs. H. Cufly, Captain H., Miss Friedlands, Stella, Morgan, W.C." He always indicated his own presence in the group by his initials. I need hardly say that W.C. figured largely in all the albums. He had the traditional passion of his

kind for the destruction of life, there was hardly a page that was not adorned with the grinning, morose head of some dismembered animal or fish.

Suddenly, amid all those groups of people I didn't know and was never likely to know, my eye lighted on a face that I recognised. A thin, rather sheep-like face with sparse hair brushed straight back and small eyes that looked as if it were only the narrow high-bridged nose that prevented them from rushing together and merging for ever.

"That," I said, "is Ellsworth Ponsonby."

The Major's face lit up. "Do you know old Ponsonby?"

I replied that I had known him on and off for several years. The Major seemed, quite agreeably, stricken by the coincidence.

"Fancy that now!" he said. "Fancy you knowing old Ponsonby." He sat down next to me on the bed and stared over my shoulder at the photograph as though by looking at it from the same angle he could find some explanation of the extraordinary coincidence of my knowing old Ponsonby. Old Ponsonby in the snapshot was sitting in the stern sheets of a small motor-boat. Behind him was the rich, mountainous coastline of the Island of Java, on either side of him were two good-looking young men, one fair and one dark and both obviously bronzed by the sun. Ellsworth Ponsonby himself, even in those tropical surroundings, contrived to look as pale as usual. The word "Old" as applied to him was merely

affectionate. He was, I reflected, about forty-three. He was narrow-chested and wearing, in addition to his pince-nez, a striped fisherman's jersey which was several sizes too big for him. The young men were wearing, apparently, nothing at all. I asked who they were, to which the Major replied that they were just a couple of pals of old Ponsonby's, quite decent chaps on the whole. They were making a tour of the Islands in Ponsonby's yacht, the noble proportions of which could just be discerned in the right-hand corner of the photograph.

"Never seen such a thing in my life," said the Major. "Talk about every modern convenience, that yacht was a floating palace; marble bathrooms to every cabin, a grand piano, a cocktail bar, a French chef—those rich Americans certainly know how to do themselves well. I ran across him first in Batavia—I was taking a couple of months' sick leave—had a touch of Dengue, you know, and thought I'd pay a call on an old pal of mine, Topper Watson—wonder if you know him?—used to be in the Sixth—anyway, he'd been invalided out of the army and had this place in Java, plantation of some sort, quite good shooting and some decent horses, unfortunately married a Javanese girl—quite a nice little woman, but that sort of thing gives one the shudders a bit—not that it was any of my affair, after all a man's life's his own to do what he likes with, still it seemed a pity to see a chap like old Topper on the way to going native."

"Ellsworth," I said wearily. "Ellsworth Ponsonby."

"Oh yes, old Ponsonby." The Major gave one of his

strong laughs—"Ran up against him in the bar of the Hotel des Indes—got to yarning—you know how one does, and finally he asked me on board this damned yacht of his. By God, I hadn't eaten such a dinner for years, and the brandy he gave us afterwards!" Here the Major smacked his lips and blew a lumbering kiss into the air. "We sat on deck into the small hours talking."

I wondered if the Major had really permitted Ponsonby to do any of the talking. Apparently he had for he heaved a sigh and said, "Damned sad life old Ponsonby's, he had a raw deal."

As that did not entirely fit in with what I knew of Ellsworth I asked in what way he had had such a sad life and such a raw deal.

"Wife left him," replied the Major laconically, pursing up his large lips and ejecting a smoke-ring with considerable force. "God, but women can be bitches sometimes! Did you ever know her?"

"Yes," I said. "I knew her."

"Ran off with his own chauffeur—can you imagine a decently bred woman doing such a thing? Old Ponsonby didn't say much but you could see it had broken him up completely—women like that ought to be bloody well horsewhipped. He showed me a photograph of her, pretty in rather a flash sort of way, you know, the modern type, flat-chested, no figure at all, not my idea of beauty, but each man to his own taste. After we'd looked at the photograph we went up on deck again—you could see old Ponsonby was in a state, he was

trembling and hardly said a word for about ten minutes and then damn it if he didn't start blubbing! I must say I felt sorry for the poor devil, but there was nothing I could say so I poured him out some more brandy and after a bit he pulled himself together. That was when he told me about her running off with the chauffeur—after all he'd given her everything, you know—she was a nobody before she married him. He met her first in Italy, I believe, just after the War, and they were married in Rome—then he took her over to America to meet his people—Boston, I think it was. Then they had a house in London for a couple of seasons and another one in Paris, I believe. Then this awful thing happened." The Major wiped his forehead with his handkerchief, it was getting rather stuffy in the cabin. "My God," he said pensively, "I don't know what I'd do if a woman did a thing like that to me—Poor old Ponsonby——" He broke off and was silent for a moment or two, then he turned to me. "But you knew her, didn't you?"

"Yes," I said. "I knew her."

2

Jennifer Hyde was nineteen when she first met Ellsworth Ponsonby in Alassio just after the War. She was staying at the Pension Floriana with her Aunt and a couple of girl cousins. Ellsworth was at the Grand Hotel with his mother. Old Mrs. Ponsonby was remark-

able more as a monument than a human being. Her white hair was so permanently waved and arranged that it looked like concrete. Her face was a mask of white powder and her eyes were cold and hard. Beneath her chin, which was beginning to sag, she wore a tight black velvet ribbon by day, and at night a dog-collar of seed pearls and diamonds. She sat on the terrace of the hotel every morning from eleven until one, lunched, rather resentfully, at a window table in the dining-room, retired to her bed regularly from two until four and then took a short drive through the surrounding country. She over-dressed for dinner and played bridge afterwards, wearing an expression of thinly disguised exasperation whether she won or lost. Ellsworth sometimes ate with her, drove with her, and played bridge with her. Whenever he did, the look in her eyes softened a trifle and her face relaxed. She watched him greedily, every gesture that he made, when he was shuffling the cards, when he was taking a cigarette from his elaborate Cartier cigarette-case and lighting it, whatever he did her eyes were on him sharp and terribly loving. When he was not with her he was usually with Father Robert. They would walk up and down the beach sometimes in the moonlight after dinner, their dark shadows bumping along behind them over the dry sand. Father Robert was plump with fine eyes, a thick, sensual mouth and wide soft hands which moved gently when he talked, not in any way to illustrate what he was saying, but as though they were living a different, detached life of their own. Jennifer and her

girl cousins used to allude to him as "The Black Beetle."

Ellsworth had been converted to the Catholic Faith when he was nineteen. Oddly enough his mother had put forward no objections; in some strange intuitive way she probably felt that it would keep Ellsworth close to her, and in this she was right. He had always been emotional as a boy and this Catholic business seemed somehow to calm him, also it was an outlet that he could discuss with her without outraging any proprieties. She had hoped, in her secret heart, that once away from the strong guiding influence of Father Ryan in Boston, he might, amid the interests and excitements of travel, become a little less ardent; this hope, however, was doomed to disappointment, for on arrival in London they had been met by Father Hill; in Paris by Father Jules; in Lausanne by Father MacMichael; in Rome by Father Philipo; and here, in Alassio, by Father Robert. She had not really minded the other Fathers, in fact Father MacMichael had been quite amusing, but she quite unequivocally detested Father Robert. This was in no way apparent, as her Bostonian upbringing had taught her to control any but her more superficial feelings; however, the hate was there, lying in her heart, vital, alert, and waiting.

Ellsworth, even if he suspected it, showed no sign and continued to enjoy Father Robert's company as much as he could, which was a great deal.

Mrs. Ponsonby first noticed Jennifer in the lounge of the Hotel, sitting with a young man in flannels and two

nondescript girls. Jennifer looked far from nondescript. She radiated a clear, gay, animal vitality. She was wearing a neat white tennis dress and the ends of her dark hair were damp and curly from bathing. Mrs. Ponsonby watched her for a little, covertly, from behind a novel; quick movements, good teeth and skin, obviously a lady, she smiled a lot and talked eagerly in a pleasant, rather husky voice. When she got up to go on to the terrace with the two girls and the young man, still talking animatedly, Mrs. Ponsonby rose too and went up to her room.

From that moment onwards Mrs. Ponsonby proceeded upon a course of stately espionage. Her sources of information were various. Mrs. Wortley, who was a friend of Jennifer's Aunt; the English padre Mr. Selton; Giulio, the barman in the hotel, even the floor waiter was questioned discreetly as his wife was a laundress in the town and dealt with the washing from the Pension Floriana.

In a few days she had found out quite a lot. Jennifer was nineteen, the daughter of a doctor in Cornwall, her name was Hyde. She was evidently not well-off as she had travelled out from England second-class, but she apparently had some wealthy relatives in London, had been out for a season and been presented. Mrs. Wortley was quite enthusiastic about her. "A thoroughly nice girl," she said. "Modern in one way and yet old-fashioned at the same time, if you know what I mean. I do think, of course, that it's a pity she puts quite so

much red on her lips, but after all I suppose that's the thing nowadays, and one is only young once. I remember myself when I was a girl my one idea was to be smart. I remember getting into the most dreadful hot water for turning one of my afternoon dresses into an evening frock by snipping off the sleeves and altering the front of the bodice——" Here Mrs. Wortley laughed indulgently, but Mrs. Ponsonby had lost interest.

A couple of evenings later on the terrace Mrs. Ponsonby dropped her book just as Jennifer was passing. Jennifer picked it up and returned it to her with a polite smile and, upon being pressed, agreed to sit down and have a glass of lemonade. She talked without shyness but also, Mrs. Ponsonby was pleased to observe, without too much self-possession. Before she left to join her friends who were standing about giggling slightly in the doorway, Mrs. Ponsonby had extracted a promise from her to come to lunch on the following day.

The lunch party was quite a success. At first Mrs. Ponsonby had been rather disconcerted to discover that Ellsworth had invited Father Robert, but it was not very long before she decided in her mind that it had been a good thing. To begin with the presence of Jennifer made Father Robert ill-at-ease. Mrs. Ponsonby watched with immense satisfaction the corners of his mouth nervously twitching. She also noted that he didn't talk as much as usual. Ellsworth, on the other hand, talked nineteen to the dozen; he was obviously, she observed happily, showing off. The general narrowness of

Ellsworth was not so apparent in those days, he was only twenty-six and had a certain soft personal charm when he liked to exert it. On this occasion he was only too keen to exert it. He discussed books and plays wittily with Jennifer, and whenever she laughed at anything he said, he shot rather a smug look at Father Robert. Altogether everything was going very well and Mrs. Ponsonby's spirit purred with pleasure as she watched, with cold eyes, Father Robert's left hand irritably crumbling his bread.

About a week later, during which time Jennifer and Ellsworth had struck up a platonic, pleasant friendship, Mrs. Ponsonby made her supreme gesture by dying suddenly in the lounge after dinner.

3

Jennifer Ponsonby was, to put it mildly, a reckless gambler, but her gaiety at the tables whether winning or losing was remarkable. She had a series of little superstitions, such as placing one card symmetrically on top of the other and giving the shoe two sharp peremptory little whacks before drawing—if she drew a nine she chuckled delightedly, if she made herself Baccarat she chuckled equally delightedly. Her luck, on the whole, was good, but she won gracefully, shrugging her shoulders and giving a little deprecatory smile when anyone failed to win a Banco against her.

It was the summer of 1933, and I had stopped off in Monte Carlo on my way home from Tunis. Everybody was there, of course, it was the height of the summer season. The Beach Hotel was full and I was staying at the Hotel de Paris which, actually, I preferred. Jennifer was staying with old Lily Graziani on Cap Ferrat, but she escaped whenever she could and came over to Monte Carlo to dine and gamble. I played at the same table with her for an hour or two, and then when I had lost all that I intended to lose, I asked her to come and have a drink in the bar while the shoe was being made up.

We perched ourselves on high stools and ordered "Fine à l'eaus" and talked casually enough. She asked me where I'd been and whether or not I'd seen so-and-so lately, and I asked her what she'd been up to and what had become of so-and-so. Presently a chasseur appeared and said that her table was starting again. She slipped down from her stool and said, almost defiantly, "You haven't asked after Ellsworth, but you'll be delighted to hear that he's very well indeed," then she gave a sharp little laugh, more high-pitched than usual, and disappeared into the baccarat room.

I felt a trifle embarrassed and also vaguely irritated. I hadn't mentioned Ellsworth on purpose. (A), because it might have been tactless as I hadn't the remotest idea whether they were still together or not; and (b), because I didn't care for him much anyhow, and never had. I ordered another drink and, when I had drunk it, strolled upstairs to watch the cabaret. There was an inferno of

noise going on as I came in, the band was playing full out while two American negroes were dancing a complicated routine in white evening suits and apparently enjoying it. I sat down at a corner table and watched the rest of the show. It was reasonably good. The usual paraphernalia of elaborately undressed beauties parading in and out. The usual low comedy acrobatic act. The usual mournful young woman crooning through the microphone. I glanced round the room occasionally. All the same faces were there. They had been here last year and the year before, and would be here next year and the year after. They changed round a bit, of course. Baby Leyland was with Georgie this year, and Bobbie had a new blonde. The Gruman-Lewis party looked tired and disgruntled, but then they always did. I felt oppressed and bored and far too hot. I watched Jennifer come in with Tiny Matlock. They were hailed by Freda and Gordon Blake and sat down at their table. It was one of the noisier tables. I think Alaistair who was sitting at the end, must have been doing some of his dirtier imitations, because they were all laughing extravagantly, rather too loudly, I thought, considering the hundreds of times they must have heard them before.

Jennifer laughed with the rest, meanwhile refurbishing her make-up, holding the mirror from her vanity-case at one angle in order to catch the light. Her movements were swift and nervous, she stabbed at her mouth with the lipstick and then, holding the glass at arm's length, looked at it through narrowed eyes and made a slight

grimace. Suddenly, in that moment, I can't think why, I knew quite definitely that she was wretched. My memory ran back over the years that I had known her, never intimately, never beyond the easy casualness of Christian names, but always, I reflected, with pleasure. She had always been gay company, charming to dance with, fun to discover unexpectedly in a house-party. I remembered the first time I had met her in London, it must have been 1920 or 1921, the pretty young wife of a rich American. That was a long time ago, nearly thirteen years, and those years had certainly changed her. I watched her across the room. She was talking now, obviously describing something, gesticulating a little with her right hand. There was a moment's lull in the general noise, and I caught for a second the sound of her husky laugh, quite a different timbre from that which she had given as she left the bar. "You haven't asked after Ellsworth, but you'll be delighted to hear that he's very well indeed."

I decided to walk back to my hotel, rather than take a taxi, the night was cool and quiet after the cigarette smoke and noise of the Casino. I had nearly reached the top of the first hill when I heard a car coming up behind me. It seemed to be coming a great deal too fast, so I stepped warily against the parapet to let it go by. It came whirling round the corner with a screech of brakes, a small open Fiat two-seater. It stopped noisily about a yard away from me and I saw that Jennifer was driving it. "I saw you leaving the Casino and chased you," she

said rather breathlessly, "because I wanted to say I was sorry."

I stepped forward. "What on earth for?"

"If you didn't notice so much the better, but I've had a horrid feeling about it ever since I left you in the bar. I tossed my curls at you and spoke harshly, it's no use pretending I didn't because I did, I know I did."

"What nonsense!" I said.

"Get in, there's a darling, and I'll drive you wherever you want to go—where do you want to go? I've got to get to Cap Ferrat."

"Not as far as that anyhow, just the Hotel de Paris."

I got in and sat down beside her. She let in the clutch and we drove on up into the town. The streets were deserted as it was getting on for three in the morning. Suddenly she stopped the car by the kerb in front of a sports shop; the window was filled with tennis racquets, golf clubs and sweaters.

"I'm now going to do something unforgivable," she said in a strained voice. "I've been trying not to for hours, but it's no use." She sat back in the driving seat and looked at me. "I'm going to cry. I hate women who cry, but I can't help it, everything's absolutely bloody, and I know it's none of your business and that this is an imposition, but we've been friends on and off for years and——" Here she broke off and buried her face in her hands. I put my arm round her. "I don't think you'd better be too sympathetic," she muttered into my shoulder. "It'll probably make me worse." Then she

started to sob, not hysterically, not even very noisily, but they were painful sobs as though she were fighting them too strongly——

"For God's sake let go!" I said sharply. "If you don't you'll probably burst!"

She gave me a little pat and relaxed a bit. Two or three cars passed, but she kept her head buried against my shoulder. I sat quite still and looked gloomily at the tennis racquets. I felt rather bewildered and quite definitely uncomfortable. Not that I wasn't touched, that out of all the people she knew she should surprisingly have selected me to break down with. My discomfort was caused by a strange feeling of oppression, a similar sensation to that which one experiences sometimes on entering a sad house, a house wherein unhappy, cruel things have taken place. I almost shuddered, but controlled it. Some intuition must have made her feel this, for she sat up and reached her hand behind her for her vanity-case. "I am so dreadfully sorry," she said. I smiled as reassuringly as I could and lit a cigarette for her. She wiped her eyes, powdered her nose, took it and sat silently for a little—I noticed her lip tremble occasionally, but she didn't cry any more. Suddenly she seemed to come to some sort of decision and leant forward and re-started the engine. "I'll drop you home now," she said in a stifled voice which struck me as infinitely pathetic; there was an almost childish gallantry in the way she said it, like a very small boy who has fallen down and broken his knee and is determined to be brave over it.

"You'll do nothing of the sort," I said quickly. "You'll drive me up on to the Middle Corniche and there we'll sit and smoke ourselves silly and watch the sun come up."

She protested: "Honestly, I'm all right now—I swear I am."

"Do what you're told," I said.

She gave the ghost of a smile and off we went.

We stopped just the other side of Eze, left the car parked close in to the side of the wood, having taken the cushions out of it, and arranged ourselves facing the view, with our backs against a low stone wall. Jennifer hardly spoke, and we sat there for quite a long while in silence. Far below us on the right, Cap Ferrat stretched out into the sea like a quiet sleeping animal. Occasionally a train, looking like an elaborate mechanical toy, emerged from a tunnel, ran along by the edge of the sea for a little way and then disappeared again, the lights from its carriage windows striping the trees and rocks and houses as it passed. The rumbling sound of it came to us late when it was no longer in sight. Every now and then, but not very often, a car whirred along the road behind us and we could see its headlights diminishing in the distance, carving the darkness into fantastic shapes and shadows as it went. The path of the moon glittered across the sea to the horizon and there were no ships passing.

"I suppose it would be too obvious if I said: 'Now then'?"

Jennifer sighed. " 'Now then,' is a bit discouraging,"

she said. "Too arbitrary—couldn't we lead into it a little less abruptly?"

"How is Ellsworth?" I said airily. "Or rather, where is Ellsworth?"

"Very well indeed, and in Taormina."

"Why Taormina?"

She fidgeted a little. "He likes Taormina."

There was a long silence while we both looked at Ellsworth in Taormina. I can't vouch for Jennifer's view, but mine was clear. I saw him going down to bathe, wearing sandals, a discreetly coloured jumper and flannel trousers with a faint stripe. I saw him at lunch in the cool monastic hotel dining-room, talking earnestly with a couple of Catholic Fathers. I saw him in the evening, after dinner, sitting in a café with a few of the young locals round him, standing them drinks and speaking in precise, rather sibilant Italian with a strong Bostonian accent.

"He can't get sunburnt, you know," said Jennifer irrelevantly. "And he does try so hard. Isn't it sad?"

"Not even pink?"

"Only very occasionally, and that fades almost immediately."

"Freckles?"

"A few, but in the wrong places."

"How much does he mind?"

"Desperately, I think." Jennifer sighed again, deeply. "It's become a sort of complex with him. He has quite a lot of complexes really. The Catholic Church, Italian

Gothic, Walt Whitman and not over-tipping. He's a beauty lover, I'm afraid."

"You should never have married a beauty lover."

She nodded. "Beauty lovers certainly are Hell."

"Why did you?"

"Why did I what?"

"Marry him."

"Hold on to your hats, boys, here we go!" She laughed faintly and said, "I think I'd better have another cigarette, I'm told it gives one social poise. I'm afraid my social poise has been rather over-strained during these last few years."

I gave her a cigarette. "Why not begin at the beginning?" I suggested. "You know it's all coming out eventually, you might just as well go the whole hog."

"I wonder where that expression originated?" she said. "It doesn't really make sense—you can't go a hog, whole or otherwise."

"Never mind about that."

"I don't really."

"Why did you marry him?"

"I was an innocent girl," she replied. "When I say innocent girl, I naturally mean a bloody fool. I was ignorant of even the most superficial facts of life. Circumstances conspired against me—doesn't that sound lovely?—but it's honestly true, they did. I was in Italy, staying with Aunt Dora in a pension, and Ellsworth and his mother were at the Grand Hotel. They had a suite, of course, and as far as the hotel was concerned they were

the star turn on account of being American and very rich. The old girl took a fancy to me, why I shall never know, and asked me to lunch, and there was Ellsworth. He really was quite sweet in those days and funny; he said funny things and knew a lot and was nice to be with. There was a priest there, too, Father Robert, who I suspect had his eye on the Ponsonby fortune—some priests on behalf of their church have a strong commercial sense—anyhow, he took a hatred to me on sight which I rather enjoyed. Then came the moment when circumstances conspired against me. Old Mrs. Ponsonby upped and died of a heart attack in the lounge of the hotel just as we were all having our after-dinner coffee. It really was very horrid, and I was desperately sorry for poor Ellsworth. That was where the trouble started. Pity may be a Christian virtue, but it's dangerous to muck about with, and can play the devil with commonsense. Well, to continue, as they say, from that moment onwards, Ellsworth clung to me; you see, I had unwittingly and most unfortunately ousted Father Robert from his affections. He cried a good deal, which was natural enough, as he'd never been away from his mother all his life. I went with him to the funeral, which was pretty grim, and did my best to comfort him as well as I could. Then, the night after the funeral he suddenly appeared at our pension and said he wanted to talk to me. My Aunt Dora was in a fine flutter, being one of those nice-minded British matrons who can only see any rich young man as a prospective bed-mate for their younger un-

attached female relatives. I think she probably regretted that Ellsworth didn't want to talk to Grace or Vera, who were her own daughters—and God knows she couldn't have regretted it half as much as I did later—but still, I was an unmarried niece, and half a loaf is better than whatever it is, and so out I went into the sweet-scented Italian night with Ellsworth and her blessing. We walked for a long way, first of all through the town and then along the beach. Ellsworth didn't say much until we sat down with our backs to a wall, rather like we're sitting here, only without the view, just the sea lapping away and a lot of stars. Then he started. Oh dear!" Jennifer shifted herself into a more comfortable position. "He told me all about himself from the word go, not in any exhibitionistic way, but as though he just had to get it out of his system in spite of caution and decency and traditionally bred reticence—again like I'm doing now." She laughed rather sharply. "I wonder why people do it? I wonder if it's ever any use?"

"It's all right," I said, "when there are no strings attached. Don't get discouraged, it will do you a power of good."

"You're very sweet," she said. "I do hope I'm not going to cry again."

There was silence for a few moments and then she went on, speaking more quickly.

"I can't possibly tell you all he said, because it wouldn't be fair. I couldn't ever tell anybody, but the main thing was that he was frightened, frightened to death of himself.

That was why he had become a Roman Catholic, that fear. He wasn't very articulate about it really, and he jumped from one thing to another so that on the whole I was pretty bewildered, but I did feel dreadfully touched and sad for him, and foolishly, wholeheartedly anxious to help him. He said, among other things, that he'd always been terrified of women until he met me and that the thought of marriage sort of revolted him. Of course, he hadn't had to worry about it much as long as his mother was alive, but now he was utterly lost, he couldn't face the loneliness of having no one. Father Robert had tried to persuade him to join the Church in some capacity or other, I don't exactly know what, but he fought shy of this, because he didn't feel that he had a genuine vocation or enough faith or something. He went on and on rambling here and there. One minute he'd be talking about Father Robert and how wonderful the Church was, because it knew everything about everyone, and could solve all problems if only one believed enough. Then he'd jump back, a long way back, into his childhood and talk about a friend he had at his prep school called Homer—aren't Americans awful giving their children names like that?—Homer was apparently very important, he kept on cropping up. You've no idea how strange it was sitting there on the sand with all that emotion and fright and unhappiness whirling round my head. I was only nineteen and didn't understand half of what he was talking about, but I do remember feeling pent-up and strained and rather wanting to scream. Presently he calmed down

a bit and said something about how terrible it was to live in a world where no one understood you, and that Society was made for the normal, ordinary people, and there wasn't any place for the misfits. Then, then he asked me to marry him. To do him justice he was as honest as he could be. He said I was the only person he could trust and that we could travel and see the world and entertain and have fun. He didn't talk about the money side of it, but he implied a great deal. I knew perfectly well he was rich, anyhow——" She paused for a moment, and fumbled in her bag for her handkerchief. "But that wasn't why I married him, honestly it wasn't. Of course it had something to do with it, I suppose. You see, I'd been poor all my life, Father's practice wasn't up to much and the idea of having all the clothes and things that I wanted, and being able to travel, which I'd always longed to do, probably helped a bit, but it wasn't the whole reason or anything like it, I swear it wasn't. The real reason was much stranger and more complicated and difficult to explain. On looking back on it, I think I can see it clearly, but even now I'm not altogether sure. I was very emotional and romantic and really very nice inside when I was young, far nicer than I am now. There ought to be a law against bringing children up to have nice instincts and ideals, it makes some of the things that happen afterwards so much more cruelly surprising than they need be. I can see now, that I quite seriously married Ellsworth from a sense of duty—doing my good deed for the day. Girl Guides for ever. I knew perfectly well

that I didn't love him, at least my brain knew it and told me so, but I didn't listen and allowed my emotions, my confused, adolescent, sentimental emotions, to drag me in the other direction. I remember forcing myself to imagine what it would be like, the actual sex part, I mean, and thinking, quite blithely, that it would be lovely and thrilling to lie in Ellsworth's arms and be a comfort to him and look after him and stand between him and his loneliness. Of course, my imagination over all this wasn't very clear, as my sex experience to date had consisted of little more than an unavowed and beautiful passion for Miss Hilton-Smith, our games mistress at St. Mary's, Plymouth, and a few daring kisses from a young man at a hunt ball in Bodmin. Obviously, I hadn't the remotest idea what I was letting myself in for, so I said 'Yes', and two days later, still in a haze of romantic and emotional confusion, we went off to Nice, without letting anyone suspect a thing, and were married in some sort of office by a man with a goitre."

Jennifer held out her hand for another cigarette. I lit one for her and without saying a word, waited for her to go on.

"Then the trouble started." She gave a slight shudder. "I'm not going to tell you all the details, but it was all very frightening and horrid and humiliating, I think humiliating more than anything else. After a few weeks, during which time Father had appeared and Aunt Dora and a very pompous uncle of Ellsworth's, and there had been a series of scenes and discussions and a great deal

of strain, Ellsworth and I went to Rome and stayed there for months. In due course I was received into the Church. I didn't have much feeling about that one way or another and Ellsworth was very insistent, so there it was. We were finally married properly with a great deal of music and rejoicing and a lot of American-born Italian Marchesas giving parties for us. As a matter of fact, old Lily Graziani was one of them, the nicest one, I'm staying with her now." She indicated Cap Ferrat with a vague gesture. "Then we went away, practically right round the world, starting with Boston and all Ellsworth's relations. Oh, dear!" she gave a little laugh. "That was very tricky, but some of them were all right. After that, we went to Honolulu and Japan and China, then to India and Egypt and back to England. That was when we first met, wasn't it, at the house in Great Cumberland Place? By that time, of course, I'd become a bit hardened. I was no longer romantic and innocent and nice. I'd learned a lot of things, I'd joined the Navy and seen the world. All those lovely places, all those chances for happiness, just out of reach, thrown away. Don't misunderstand me, it wasn't the sex business that was upsetting me, at least I don't think it was. I'd faced the failure of that ages before. Oh no, it was Ellsworth himself. I should have been perfectly happy, well, if not happy, at least content, if Ellsworth had played up and been kind and ordinary and a gay companion, but he didn't and he wasn't. I suppose people can't help being beastly, can they? It's something to do with

glandular secretions and environment and things that happened to you when you were a child. I can only think that the most peculiar things certainly happened to Ellsworth when he was a child and his glandular secretions must have been something fierce. At any rate, I hadn't been with him long before I knew, beyond a shadow of doubt, that he was a thoroughly unpleasant character. Not in any way bad in the full sense of the word. Not violent or sadistic, or going off on dreadful drunks and coming back and beating me up. Nothing like that, nothing nearly so direct. He was far too refined and carefully cultured, you said it just now, a beauty lover, that's what he was, a hundred per cent rip-snorting beauty lover. Oh dear, how can one reconcile being a beauty lover with being mean, prurient, sulky and pettishly tyrannical almost to a point of mania? The answer is that one can, because there are several sorts of beauty lovers. There are those who like kindness and good manners and wide seas and dignity, and others who, like Bellini Madonnas and Giottos and mysticism and incense and being able to recognise, as publicly as possible, a genuine old this or old that. I don't believe it's enough——" Jennifer's voice rose a little. "I don't believe it's enough, all that preoccupation with the dead and done with, when there's living life all round you and sudden, lovely unexpected moments to be aware of. Sudden loving gestures from other people, without motives, nothing to do with being rich or poor or talented or cultured, just our old friend human nature at

its best! That's the sort of beauty worth searching for; it may sound pompous, but I know what I mean. That's the sort of beauty-lover that counts. I am right, aren't I? It's taken me so many miserable hours trying to puzzle things out." She stopped abruptly, almost breathless, and looked at me appealingly.

"Yes," I said, "I think you're right."

"The trouble with Ellsworth," she went on more calmly, "was that he had no love in his heart for any living soul except himself. Even his mother, who I suppose meant more to him than anyone else, faded quickly out of his memory. After the first few weeks he hardly ever referred to her, and if he did it was lightly, remotely, as though she had been someone of little importance whom he had once met and passed a summer with. If he had been honest with me or even honest with himself, it would have been all right, but he was neither. He dealt in lies, small, insignificant lies; this was at first, later the lies became bigger and more important. He made a lot of friends as we pursued our rather dreary social existence, some of them appeared to be genuinely fond of him, at any rate in the beginning; others quite blatantly fawned on him for what they could get out of him. I watched, rather anxiously sometimes, and occasionally tried to warn him. I still felt there was a chance, you know, not of reforming him, I wasn't as smug as that, but of reaching a plane of mutual companionship on which we could both live our own lives and discuss things, and have a certain amount of fun

together without conflict and irritation and getting on each other's nerves. But it wasn't any use. He distrusted me, principally I think because I was a woman. There wasn't anything to be done. It was hopeless. Then, after we'd been married for several years, a situation occurred. It was in New York, we were staying at the Waldorf, and it was all very unpleasant and nearly developed into a front-page scandal. I'm a bit vague as to what actually happened myself, there were so many conflicting stories, but anyhow, Ellsworth was blackmailed, and I had to interview strange people and tell a lot of lies, and a lot of money was handed out and we sailed, very hurriedly, for Europe. After that, things were beastlier than ever. He was sulky and irritable and took to making sarcastic remarks at me in front of strangers. All the resentment of a weak nature, that had been badly frightened, came to the top. Finally, I could bear it no longer and asked him to divorce me. That was the only time I have ever seen him really furious. He went scarlet in the face with rage. He was a Catholic and I was a Catholic. That was that. There could be no question of such a thing. Then I lost my head, and told him what I really thought of him, and that I was perfectly sure that the Catholic business was not really the reason for his refusal at all. He was really worried about what people would say; terrified of being left without the nice social buttress of a wife who could preside at his table, arrive with him at pompous receptions and fashionable first nights and in fact, visually at least, cover his tracks. We had a blistering row, and I

left the house, that was the house in Paris, you remember it, in the Avenue d'Ièna, and went to London to stay with Marjorie Bridges. He followed me in about a week, and a series of dreary scenes took place. He actually cried during one of them, and said that he was really devoted to me deep down and that he would never again do anything to humiliate me in any way. I think he was honestly dreadfully frightened of me leaving him. Frightened of himself, I mean, that old fear that he had told me about, sitting on the beach, when he first asked me to marry him. I gave in in the end. There wasn't anything else to do really. And that's how we are now. He goes off on his own every now and then and does what he likes, but never for very long. He hasn't the courage for real adventure. Then we join up again, and open the house in Paris, and give parties, and do everything that everyone else does. Sometimes we go for a yachting cruise through the Greek Islands, or up the Dalmatian coast or round about here. Actually, I'm waiting now for him to come back, and I suppose we'll collect a dozen people that we don't care for, and who don't care for us, and off we shall go to Corsica or Majorca or Tangier. It's a lovely life."

She sat silently for a moment, looking out over the sea, then she rose to her feet and began to kick a stone with the toe of her evening shoe. "That's about all," she said.

I got up, too, and we clambered over the wall and walked slowly over to the car.

"Not quite all," I said mildly, putting the cushions into

the car. "You haven't yet told me why you were crying."

"Isn't that enough?"

"Not quite."

She got into the car and started fiddling with the engine. She spoke without looking at me. "I have never been unfaithful to Ellsworth," she said in a dry, flat voice. "I know I could have easily, but it always seemed to me that it might make the situation even more squalid than it is already. Anyhow, I have never found anyone among the people we meet whom I could love enough to make it worth it. Perhaps something will happen some day—I wouldn't like to die an old maid."

She started the car and drove me back to Monte Carlo. It was getting quite light and the whole landscape looked as though it had been newly washed. She dropped me at the Hotel de Paris then, just as she was about to drive away, she leant over the side of the car and kissed me lightly on the cheek. She said: "Thank you, darling, I'll be grateful always to you for having been so really lovingly kind."

I watched the car until it had turned the corner and was out of sight.

4

"—But a chap's own chauffeur," the Major was saying. "I mean that really is going too far——"

"Where are they now?" I interrupted. "She and the chauffeur—did he tell you?"

"Out in Canada, I believe; the man's a Canadian. They run a garage or a petrol station or something—funnily enough, she wouldn't take any of old Ponsonby's money, he offered it, of course, he's that sort of chap, you know 'quixotic,' is that the word?"

"Yes," I said, "that's the word."

The major collected the photograph albums and packed them in his suit-case, as he did so he hummed a tune rather breathily. My mind went back to that early, newly washed morning four years ago—driving down through the dawn to Monte Carlo. I remembered the emptiness in Jennifer's voice when she said: "Anyhow, I have never found anyone among the people we meet whom I could love enough to make it worth it—perhaps something will happen some day—I wouldn't like to die an old maid."

The major straightened himself. "What about a nightcap?" he said.

We went up on deck. The air was clear and cold, and there was hardly any wind. Far away on the port bow a lighthouse on the French coast flashed intermittently.

In the smoking-room the major flung himself, with a certain breezy abandon, into a leather armchair which growled under the strain.

"Fancy you knowing old Ponsonby," he said. "The world certainly is a very small place. You know there's a lot of truth in those old chestnuts." I nodded absently and lit a cigarette. He snapped his fingers loudly to attract the steward's attention. "I shall never forget that

night as long as I live, seeing that poor chap crying like a kid, absolutely broken up. It's a pretty bad show when a man's whole life is wrecked by some damned woman. What I can't get over——" he leant forward and lowered his voice; there was an expression of genuine, horrified bewilderment in his, by now, slightly bloodshot eyes— "is that she should have gone off with his own chauffeur!"

"I suspect," I said gently, "that was why he was crying."

"Steward! Two stengahs!" said the major.